

William Shakespeare

Introduction

William Shakespeare was a renowned **English poet, playwright, and actor** born in **1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon**.

His birthday is most commonly celebrated on **23 April**, which is also believed to be the date **he died in 1616**.

Shakespeare was a **prolific writer of British theatre** during the **Elizabethan and Jacobean ages** (sometimes called the **English Renaissance** or the **Early Modern Period**). Shakespeare's plays are perhaps his most enduring legacy, **but they are not all he wrote**. Shakespeare's poems also remain popular to this day.

Shakespeare lived at a time when ideas and social structures established in the Middle Ages still informed human thought and behaviour.

Queen Elizabeth, I was God's deputy on earth, and lords and commoners had their due places in society under her, with responsibilities up through her to God and down to those of humbler rank.

The order of things, however, did not go unquestioned.

Atheism was still considered a challenge to the beliefs and way of life of a majority of **Elizabethans**, but the Christian faith was no longer single.

Rome's authority had been challenged by **Martin Luther, John Calvin**, a multitude of small religious sects, and, indeed, the English church itself.

Royal **prerogative** was challenged in Parliament; the economic and social orders were disturbed by the rise of capitalism, the redistribution of monastic lands under Henry VIII, the expansion of education, and the influx of new wealth from the discovery of new lands.

Detailed Study

William Shakespeare (26 April 1564 (baptized) – 23 April 1616, was an English poet and playwright, widely regarded as the **greatest writer in the English language** and the world's pre-eminent dramatist.

He is often called **England's national poet and the "Bard of Avon"**. His extant works, including some collaborations, **consist of about 38 plays, 154 sonnets**, two long narrative poems, and a few other verses.

Shakespeare was born and brought up in **Stratford-upon-Avon**. At the **age of 18**, he married **Anne Hathaway**, with whom he had three children: **Susanna**, and twins **Hamnet and Judith**. Between **1585** and **1592**, he began a successful career in London as an actor, writer, and part-owner of a playing company called the **Lord Chamberlain's Men**, later known as the **King's Men**.

He appears to have retired to Stratford around 1613 at age 49, where he died three years later. Shakespeare produced most of his known work between 1589 and 1613.

His early plays were mainly **comedies and histories**, genres he raised to the peak of sophistication and artistry by the end of the 16th century.

He then wrote mainly tragedies until about **1608**, including ***Hamlet, King Lear, Othello***, and ***Macbeth***, considered some of the finest works in the English language.

In 1623, **John Heminges** and **Henry Condell**, two friends and fellow actors of Shakespeare published the First Folio, a collected edition of his dramatic works that included all but two of the plays now recognized as Shakespeare's.

Shakespeare was a respected poet and playwright in his day, but his reputation did not rise to its present heights until the 19th century.

In the 20th century, his work was repeatedly adopted and rediscovered by new movements in scholarship and performance.

It is not known exactly when Shakespeare began writing, but contemporary allusions and records of performances show that several of his plays were on the London stage by 1592. By then, he was sufficiently well known in London to be attacked in print by the playwright **Robert Greene** in his ***Groats-Worth of Wit***.

Most agree that Greene is accusing Shakespeare of reaching above his rank in trying to match university-educated writers such as Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Nashe, and Greene himself (the "university wits").

Greene's attack is the earliest surviving mention of Shakespeare's career in the theatre. Biographers suggest that his **career may have begun any time from the mid-1580s** to just before Greene's remarks.

From 1594, Shakespeare's plays were performed by only **Lord Chamberlain's Men**, a company owned by a group of players, including Shakespeare, that soon became the leading playing company in London. After the death of Queen Elizabeth in 1603, the company was awarded a **royal patent by the new king, James I**, and changed its name to the **King's Men**.

In **1599**, a partnership of company members built their theatre on the south bank of the river **Thames**, which they called the Globe.

In **1608**, the partnership also took over the Blackfriars indoor theatre. Records of Shakespeare's property purchases and investments indicate that the company made him a wealthy man.

In **1597**, he bought the second-largest house in Stratford, New Place.

Some of Shakespeare's plays were published in **quarto editions from 1594**. By 1598, his name had become a selling point and began to appear on the title pages. Shakespeare continued to act in his own and other plays after his success as a playwright.

The **1616** edition of **Ben Jonson's Works** names him on the cast lists for ***Every Man in His Humour* (1598)** and ***Sejanus His Fall* (1603)**.

The absence of his name from the 1605 cast list for Jonson's ***Volpone*** is taken by some scholars as a sign that his acting career was nearing its end. The First Folio of 1623, however, lists Shakespeare as one of **"the Principal Actors in all these Plays"**.

In 1709, Rowe passed down a tradition that Shakespeare played the ghost of Hamlet's father.

Later traditions maintain that he also played **Adam** in ***As You Like It*** and the Chorus in ***Henry V***, though scholars doubt the sources of the information. Shakespeare divided his time between London and Stratford during his career.

Rowe was the first biographer to pass down the tradition that Shakespeare retired to Stratford some years before his death.

In 1612, Shakespeare was called as a witness in ***Bellott v. Mountjoy***, a court case concerning the marriage settlement of Mountjoy's daughter, Mary.

In March 1613 he bought a **gatehouse** in the former Blackfriars priory; and from November 1614 he was in London for several weeks with his son-in-law, John Hall.

After 1610, Shakespeare wrote fewer plays, and none are attributed to him after 1613. His last three plays were collaborations, probably with **John Fletcher**, who succeeded him as the house playwright for the King's Men.

Shakespeare died on **23 April 1616** and was survived by his wife and two daughters. Susanna had married a physician, John Hall, in 1607, and Judith had married Thomas Quinney, a vintner, two months before Shakespeare's death.

Shakespeare was buried in the chancel of the Holy Trinity Church two days after his death.

Shakespeare's literary debts

Shakespeare's most obvious debt was to **Raphael Holinshed**, whose ***Chronicles*** (the second edition, published in 1587) furnished story material for several plays, including ***Macbeth*** and ***King Lear***.

In Shakespeare's earlier works other debts stand out clearly: to **Plautus** for the structure of ***The Comedy of Errors***; to the poet **Ovid** and Seneca for **rhetoric** and incident in ***Titus Andronicus***; to morality drama for a scene in which a father mourns his dead son and a son his father, in ***Henry VI, Part 3***; to **Christopher Marlowe** for sentiments and characterization in ***Richard III*** and ***The Merchant of Venice***; to the Italian popular tradition of *commedia dell'arte* for characterization and dramatic style in ***The Taming of the Shrew***; and so on.

Soon, however, there was no line between their effects and his. In ***The Tempest*** (perhaps the most original of all his plays in form, theme, language, and setting) folk influences may also be traced, together with a newer and more obvious debt to a courtly diversion known as the masque, as developed by **Ben Jonson** and others at the court of King James.

Of Shakespeare's late works, ***Cardenio*** (now lost) was probably based on incidents involving the character Cardenio in **Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote***.

Since that great work had been translated into English in 1612 by **Thomas Shelton**, it was available to Shakespeare and **John Fletcher** when they collaborated as authors on ***Cardenio*** in 1613. Fletcher turned to **Cervantes** in several of his later plays.

Career and Creation of the Globe

William Shakespeare first made his appearance on the London stage, where his plays would be written and performed, **around 1592**, although the exact date is unknown. He was, however, well known enough to be attacked by critics in newspapers, and thus was considered to be already an established playwright.

After the year 1594, Shakespeare's plays were solely performed by a company owned by a group of actors known as the **Lord Chamberlain's Men**, which became London's leading company.

After Queen Elizabeth died in 1603, the company was given a royal patent that renamed it the King's Men, named so after King James I.

Shakespeare, along with a group of players that acted in his play, created his theatre on the River Thames in 1599 and named it the Globe Theatre. After that, a record of property purchases and investments made by Shakespeare showed the playwright had become a very wealthy man, so much so that he bought properties in London and Stratford for himself and his family, as he spent most of his time in London.

It was in 1594 that the first known quartos of Shakespeare's plays were published, solidifying his reputation by 1598 when his name became the selling point in new productions. This led to his success as both an actor on stage and a playwright, and his name was published on the title page of his plays.

Shakespeare continued to work with his company of men at the Globe Theatre until around 1610, the year that he retired from working on the stage. He, however, continued to support the Globe Theatre, including buying apartments for playwrights and actors to live in, all of which were near the theatre.

His Plays

Most playwrights of the period typically collaborated with others at some point, and critics agree that Shakespeare did the same, mostly early and late in his career.

The first recorded works of Shakespeare are ***Richard III*** and the three parts of ***Henry VI***, written in the early **1590s** during a vogue for historical drama.

Shakespeare's plays are difficult to date, however, and studies of the texts suggest that ***Titus Andronicus***, ***The Comedy of Errors***, ***The Taming of the Shrew*** and ***The Two Gentlemen of Verona*** may also belong to Shakespeare's earliest period.

His first histories, draw heavily on the 1587 edition of Raphael Holinshed's ***Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland***.

The early plays were influenced by the works of other **Elizabethan dramatists**, especially **Thomas Kyd** and **Christopher Marlowe**, by the traditions of medieval drama, and by the plays of Seneca.

The Comedy of Errors was also based on classical models.

A ***Midsummer Night's Dream*** is a witty mixture of romance, fairy magic, and comic lowlife scenes.

Shakespeare's next comedy, ***Merchant of Venice***, contains a portrayal of the vengeful Jewish moneylender Shylock, which reflects Elizabethan views.

After the lyrical ***Richard II***, written almost entirely in verse, Shakespeare introduced prose comedy into the histories of the late 1590s, ***Henry IV, parts 1 and 2***, and ***Henry V***. His characters become more complex and tender as he switches deftly between comic and serious scenes, prose and poetry, and achieves the narrative variety of his mature work.

The period begins and ends with two tragedies: ***Romeo and Juliet***, the famous romantic tragedy of sexually charged adolescence, love, and death; and ***Julius Caesar***—based on Sir Thomas North's 1579 translation of Plutarch's ***Parallel Lives***—introduced a new kind of drama.

In the early 17th century, Shakespeare wrote the so-called "problem plays" ***Measure for Measure***, ***Troilus and Cressida***, and ***All's Well That Ends Well***, and a number of his best-known tragedies.

Many critics believe that Shakespeare's greatest tragedies represent the peak of his art. The titular hero of one of Shakespeare's most famous tragedies, ***Hamlet***, has probably been discussed more than any other Shakespearean character.

According to Shakespearean scholar James Shapiro, in ***Julius Caesar*** "the various strands of politics, character, inwardness, contemporary events, even Shakespeare's reflections on the act of writing, began to infuse each other".

In ***Othello***, the villain Iago stokes Othello's sexual jealousy to the point where he murders the innocent wife who loves him.

In ***King Lear***, the old king commits the tragic error of giving up his powers, initiating the events which lead to the torture and blinding of the Earl of Gloucester and the murder of Lear's youngest daughter Cordelia.

In ***Macbeth***, the shortest and most compressed of Shakespeare's tragedies, uncontrollable ambition incites Macbeth and his wife, Lady Macbeth, to murder the rightful king and usurp the throne, until their guilt destroys them in turn.

His last major tragedies, ***Antony and Cleopatra*** and ***Coriolanus***, contain some of Shakespeare's finest poetry and were considered his most successful tragedies by the poet and critic T. S. Eliot.

In his final period, Shakespeare turned to romance or tragicomedy and completed three more major plays: ***Cymbeline***, ***The Winter's Tale***, and ***The Tempest***, as well as the collaboration, ***Pericles, Prince of Tyre***.

Less bleak than the tragedies, these four plays are graver in tone than the comedies of the 1590s, but they end with reconciliation and the forgiveness of potentially tragic errors.

Shakespeare collaborated on two further surviving plays, ***Henry VIII*** and ***The Two Noble Kinsmen***, probably with John Fletcher.

Poems and Sonnets

Two volumes of poetry and over 150 sonnets are attributed to Shakespeare. It is thought that although Shakespeare was a poet throughout his lifetime, he turned to poetry most notably during 1593 and 1594 when a plague forced theatres in London to shut down.

The volumes of narrative poems that Shakespeare released during those years were called **Venus and Adonis** and **The Rape of Lucrece**.

Both volumes focused on the problems surrounding uncontrollable lust and the guilt associated with it afterward and were very well received during his lifetime, partially for their erotic tone. In this vein, Shakespeare also wrote **A Lover's Complaint**, which was included in the first edition of Shakespeare's sonnets, which were released in 1609.

Shakespeare's sonnets were a collection of over 150 works that were published late in his life and without any indication of when each of the pieces was composed. It is widely thought that the sonnets were a part of a private diary that was never meant to be read publicly but was published.

The sonnets have a contrasting set of subjects - one set chronicles the poet's lust for a married woman with a dark complexion, known as **The Dark Lady**, while the other describes a conflicted or confused love for a young man, known as the "fair youth." While it is not known or confirmed, many in literature circles believe that the sonnets accurately portray the heart of the poet, leading the public to speculate on Shakespeare's views on religion, sex, marriage, and life.

Critics have praised the sonnets as being profoundly intimate and meditating on the values of love, lust, procreation, and death. Now a day, Shakespeare is ranked as the all-time most popular English poet in history, along with **Emily Dickinson**, **Robert Frost**, and **Walt Whitman**.

Textual References

In 1623, John Heminges and Henry Condell, two of Shakespeare's friends from the King's Men, published the **First Folio**, a collected edition of Shakespeare's plays. It contained **36 texts**, including **18 printed** for the first time. Many of the plays had already appeared in quarto versions—flimsy books made from sheets of paper folded twice to make four leaves.

No evidence suggests that Shakespeare approved these editions, which the First Folio describes as "**stol'n and surreptitious copies**".

The Shakespeare Influence

Shakespeare's influence on art, literature, language, and the vast array of the creative arts has long been known and documented. He is the most-read playwright in the Western Hemisphere, and the English language is littered with quotes and phrases that originated from his works. **He is also the inventor of the iambic pentameter**, a form of poetry that is still widely used today.

He is also one of the most influential figures in English literature, having had a profound impact on everyone from **Herman Melville** and **Charles Dickens** to **Agatha Christie** and **Anthony Burgess**.

But his influence did not stop at just the arts - the psychoanalyst **Sigmund Freud** used Hamlet as the foundation for many of his theories on human nature, and his influence can be felt in painting and opera as well, particularly from the operas of **Giuseppe Verdi** and the whole community of Romantic and Pre-Raphaelite painters.

But Shakespeare was and still is, the most prominent influential figure in language. Phrases such as **"breaking the ice"** or **"heart of gold"** are colloquial now, but are also known to have originated in Shakespeare's plays and sonnets. Over seven dozen examples can be taken from common life and be

directly attributed to Shakespeare, meaning that much of how people speak to each other now has a history that dates back to the 17th century.

Aside from phrases, it is also common knowledge that the dramatist introduced upwards of 1,700 original words to the English language, which, during the 16th and 17th centuries, was not standardized. Words such as lonely, frugal, dwindle, and more originate from Shakespeare, who transformed English into the populist language that it is today.

Quotes

- Brevity is the soul of wit."
- Hell is empty and all the devils are here."
- The empty vessel makes the loudest sound."
- Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them."
- Love all, trust a few, do wrong to none."
- We know what we are, but know not what we may be."
- A fool thinks himself to be wise, but a wise man knows himself to be a fool."

Chronology of Shakespeare's plays of William Shakespeare

Date of Composition	Title of play
1588–97	Love's Labour's Lost
1589–92	Henry VI, Part 1; Titus Andronicus
1589–94	The Comedy of Errors
1590–92	Henry VI, Part 2
1590–93	Henry VI, Part 3
1590–94	The Taming of the Shrew; The Two Gentlemen of Verona
1590–95	Edward III
1592–94	Richard III
1594–96	King John; Romeo and Juliet
1595–96	A Midsummer Night's Dream; Richard II
1596–97	The Merchant of Venice; Henry IV, Part 1
1597–98	Henry IV, Part 2
1597–1601	The Merry Wives of Windsor
1598–99	Much Ado About Nothing
1598–1600	As You Like It
1599	Henry V
1599–1600	Julius Caesar
1599–1601	Hamlet
1600–02	Twelfth Night
1601–02	Troilus and Cressida
1601–05	All's Well That Ends Well
1603–04	Measure for Measure; Othello
1605–06	King Lear
1605–08	Timon of Athens
1606–07	Macbeth; Antony and Cleopatra
1606–08	Pericles
1608	Coriolanus
1608–10	Cymbeline
1609–11	The Winter's Tale
1611	The Tempest
1612–14	The Two Noble Kinsmen
1613	Henry VIII; Cardenio (now lost; the presumed basis for Double Falsehood)

Detailed Work Description

Comedies

- *All's Well That Ends Well*
- *As You Like It*
- *The Comedy of Errors*
- *Love's Labour's Lost*
- *Measure for Measure*
- *The Merchant of Venice*
- *The Merry Wives of Windsor*
- *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
- *Much Ado About Nothing*
- *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*
- *The Taming of the Shrew*
- *The Tempest*
- *Twelfth Night*
- *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*
- *The Two Noble Kinsmen*

Histories

- *King John*
- *Richard II*
- *Henry IV, Part 1*
- *Henry IV, Part 2*
- *Henry V*
- *Henry VI, Part 1*
- *Henry VI, Part 2*
- *Henry VI, Part 3*
- *Richard III*
- *Henry VIII*

Tragedies

- *Romeo and Juliet*
- *Coriolanus*
- *Titus Andronicus*
- *Timon of Athens*
- *Julius Caesar*
- *Macbeth*
- *Hamlet*
- *Troilus and Cressida*
- *King Lear*
- *Othello*
- *Antony and Cleopatra*
- *Cymbeline* *

Poems

- *Shakespeare's sonnets*
- *Venus and Adonis*
- *The Rape of Lucrece*
- *The Passionate Pilgrim*
- *The Phoenix and the Turtle*
- *A Lover's Complaint*

Lost plays

- *Love's Labour's Won*
- *The History of Cardenio*

Apocrypha

- *Arden of Faversham*
- *The Birth of Merlin*
- *Edward III*
- *Edmund Ironside*
- *Lochrine*
- *The London Prodigal*
- *The Puritan*
- *The Second Maiden's Tragedy*
- *Sir John Oldcastle*
- *Thomas Lord Cromwell*
- *A Yorkshire Tragedy*
- *Sir Thomas More.*