

Shakespeare's Biography

For all his fame and celebration, William Shakespeare remains a mysterious figure with regards to personal history. There are just two primary sources for information on the Bard: his works, and various legal and church documents that have survived from Elizabethan times. Naturally, there are many gaps in this body of information, which tells us little about Shakespeare the man.

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, allegedly on April 23, 1564. Church records from Holy Trinity Church indicate that he was baptized there on April 26, 1564. Young William was born of John Shakespeare, a glover and leather merchant, and Mary Arden, a landed local heiress. William, according to the church register, was the third of eight children in the Shakespeare household—three of whom died in childhood. John Shakespeare had a remarkable run of success as a merchant, alderman, and high bailiff of Stratford, during William's early childhood. His fortunes declined, however, in the late 1570s.



William Shakespeare

There is great conjecture about Shakespeare's childhood years, especially regarding his education. Scholars surmise that Shakespeare attended the grammar school in Stratford. While there are no records extant to prove this claim, Shakespeare's knowledge of Latin and Classical Greek would tend to support this theory. In addition, Shakespeare's first biographer, Nicholas Rowe, wrote that John Shakespeare had placed William "for some time in a free school." John Shakespeare, as a Stratford official, would have been granted a waiver of tuition for his son. As the records do not exist, we do not know how long William may have attended the school, but the literary quality of his works suggests a solid educational foundation. What is certain is that William Shakespeare never proceeded to university schooling, which has contributed to the debate about the authorship of his works.

The next documented event in Shakespeare's life is his marriage to Anne Hathaway on November 28, 1582. William was 18 at the time, and Anne was 26—and pregnant. Their first daughter, Susanna, was born on May 26, 1583. The couple later had twins, Hamnet and Judith, born February 2, 1585 and christened at Holy Trinity. Hamnet died in childhood at the age of 11, on August 11, 1596.

For the seven years following the birth of his twins, William Shakespeare disappears from all records, finally turning up again in London some time in 1592. This period, known as the "Lost Years," has sparked as much controversy about Shakespeare's life as any period. Rowe notes that young Shakespeare was quite fond of poaching, and may have had to flee Stratford after an incident with Sir Thomas Lucy, whose deer and rabbits he allegedly poached. There is also rumor of Shakespeare working as an assistant schoolmaster in Lancashire for a time, though this is circumstantial at best.

It is estimated that Shakespeare arrived in London around 1588 and began to establish himself as an actor and playwright. Evidently Shakespeare garnered some envy early on, as related by the critical attack of Robert Greene, a London playwright, in 1592: "...an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers, 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 being an absolute *Johannes fac totum*, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country." Greene's bombast notwithstanding, Shakespeare must have shown considerable promise. By 1594, he was not only acting and writing for the Lord Chamberlain's Men (called the King's Men after the ascension of James I in 1603), but was a managing partner in the operation as well. With Will Kempe, a master comedian, and Richard Burbage, a leading tragic actor of the day, the Lord Chamberlain's Men became a favorite London troupe, patronized by royalty and made popular by the theatre-going public.

Shakespeare's accomplishments are apparent when studied against other playwrights of this age. His company was the most successful in London in his day. He had plays published and sold in octavo editions, or "penny-copies" to the more literate of his audiences. Never before had a playwright enjoyed sufficient acclaim to see his works published and sold as popular literature in the midst of his career. In addition, Shakespeare's ownership share in both the theatrical company and the Globe itself made him as much an entrepreneur as artist. While Shakespeare might not be accounted wealthy by London standards, his success allowed him to purchase New House and retire in comfort to Stratford in 1611.

William Shakespeare wrote his will in 1611, bequeathing his properties to his daughter Susanna (married in 1607 to Dr. John Hall). To his surviving daughter Judith, he left £300, and to his wife Anne left "my second best bed." William Shakespeare allegedly died on his birthday, April 23, 1616. This is probably more of a romantic myth than reality, but Shakespeare was interred at Holy Trinity in Stratford on April 25. In 1623, two working companions of Shakespeare from the Lord Chamberlain's Men, John Heminges and Henry Condell, printed the First Folio edition of his collected plays, of which half were previously unpublished.

William Shakespeare's legacy is a body of work that will never again be equaled in Western civilization. His words have endured for 400 years, and still reach across the centuries as powerfully as ever. Even in death, he leaves a final piece of verse as his epitaph:

*Good friend, 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.*