

William Shakespeare

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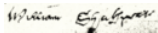
The Chandos portrait, artist and authenticity unconfirmed. National Portrait Gallery, London.

Born: April 1564 (exact date unknown)
Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire
England

Died: 23 April 1616
Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire
England

Occupation: Playwright, poet, actor

Signature:

A handwritten signature of William Shakespeare in dark ink, featuring a stylized 'W' and 'S'.

William Shakespeare (baptised 26 April 1564 – 23 April 1616)^[a] was an English poet and playwright who is now regarded as the greatest writer of the English language and the world's pre-eminent dramatist.^[1] His surviving works include 38 plays,^[b] two long narrative poems, 154 sonnets, and a few other poems. He is often called England's national poet and the "Bard of Avon" (or simply "The Bard"). His plays have been translated into every major living language and are performed more often than those of any other playwright.^[2]

Shakespeare was born and raised 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. Sometime between 1585 and 1592, Shakespeare moved to London, where he found success as an actor, writer, and part-owner of the playing company the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later known as the King's Men). He appears to have retired to Stratford around 1613, where he died three years later. Few records survive concerning

Shakespeare's private life, and considerable speculation has been poured into this void,^[3] including questions about his sexuality, religious beliefs, and whether the works attributed to him were actually written by others.^[4]

Shakespeare produced most of his known work between 1590 and 1613. He at first wrote mainly comedies and histories, genres that he raised to a peak of sophistication and artistry by the end of the sixteenth century. He then wrote mainly tragedies until 1608, producing what are considered some of the greatest in the language, including *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*. In the last phase of his career, Shakespeare turned to tragicomedies and collaborated with other playwrights. Many of Shakespeare's plays were published during his lifetime in editions of variable quality and accuracy; and in 1623, two of his former acting colleagues published the *First Folio*, a collected edition of his works that included all but two of the plays now recognised as Shakespeare's.

Shakespeare was a respected poet and playwright in his own day; but it was not until the eighteenth century that his reputation began its rise to the heights it enjoys today. The Romantics, in particular, acclaimed Shakespeare's genius; and in

the nineteenth century, the Victorians hero-worshipped Shakespeare with a reverence that George Bernard Shaw called "bardolatry".^[5] In the twentieth century, Shakespeare's work was repeatedly adopted and rediscovered by new movements in scholarship and performance. His plays remain highly popular today; constantly performed and reinterpreted in diverse cultural and political contexts throughout the world.

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Life

Early life

William Shakespeare (also spelled Shaxpere, Shakspere, Shakspeare, and Shake-speare)^[c] was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in April 1564,^[6] the son of John Shakespeare, a successful glover and alderman originally from Snitterfield, and Mary Arden, the daughter of an affluent



John Shakespeare's House in Stratford-Upon-Avon, now the home of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

landowning farmer.^[7] He was the third child of eight and the eldest surviving son.^[8] The family house on Henley Street is assumed to be Shakespeare's birthplace, though firm evidence is lacking and scholars have suggested other possibilities.^[9] Shakespeare was christened on 26 April. His unknown birthday is traditionally observed on 23 April, St George's Day,^[10] a date with an appealing symmetry, since Shakespeare died on 23 April 1616.^[11]

Shakespeare probably attended King's New School in Stratford,^[12] chartered as a free school in 1553,^[13] about a quarter of a mile from the family home. Although Elizabethan-era grammar schools varied in quality, the national curriculum had been standardised by royal edict,^[14] so the school would have provided an intensive education in Latin grammar and classical literature.^[15] However, no attendance records for the period survive.^[16]

At the age of 18, Shakespeare married the 26-year-old Anne Hathaway. The consistory court of the Diocese of Worcester issued a marriage licence on 27 November 1582, and two of Hathaway's neighbours posted bonds on 28 November as surety of no impediments to the marriage.^[17] The couple may have arranged the ceremony in some

haste, since the Worcester chancellor approved a single preliminary reading of the marriage banns, instead of the normally required three.^[18] Anne's pregnancy may have been the reason for the hurry: she gave birth to a daughter, Susanna, baptised on 26 May 1583.^[19] Twins, son Hamnet and daughter Judith, were born almost two years later and baptised on 2 February 1585.^[20] Hamnet died of unknown causes at the age of 11 and was buried on 11 August 1596.^[21]

After the birth of the twins, there are few historical traces of Shakespeare until he is mentioned as part of the London theatrical scene in 1592. Owing to that gap in the records, scholars refer to the years between 1585 and 1592 as Shakespeare's "lost years".^[22] Biographers attempting to account for this period have reported numerous apocryphal stories. Nicholas Rowe, Shakespeare's first biographer, recounts a Stratford legend that Shakespeare fled the town for London to escape prosecution for deer poaching.^[23] John Aubrey reported that Shakespeare had been a country schoolmaster,^[24] and some twentieth-century scholars have suggested that his employer might have been Alexander Houghton of Lancashire, a Catholic landowner who mentioned in his will a certain "William Shakeshafte".^[25] Another

eighteenth-century story has Shakespeare starting his theatrical career minding the horses of theatre patrons in London.^[26] However, no evidence supports such stories other than hearsay collected after Shakespeare's death.^[27]

London and theatrical career

It is not known exactly when Shakespeare began writing, but contemporary allusions and records of performances indicate that several of his plays were on the London stage by 1592.^[28] Shakespeare was well enough known in London by then to be attacked in print by a fellow playwright, Robert Greene, as "an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde*, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you: and beeing an absolute *Iohannes factotum*, is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey."^[29] Although scholars differ on the exact interpretation of Greene's words, most agree that he accuses Shakespeare of getting above himself in assuming he can write as well as university-educated playwrights such as Greene himself.^[30] The italicised line parodying the phrase "Oh, tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's

hide" from Shakespeare's *Henry VI, part 3* identifies Shakespeare as Greene's target, along with the pun "Shake-scene".^[31]

"All the world's a stage,
and all the men and women merely players:
they have their exits and their entrances;
and one man in his time plays many parts..."
As You Like It, Act II Scene 7

Greene's attack is the first reference to Shakespeare's career as an actor; and biographers speculate that his career may have begun any time from the mid-1580s until just before Greene's attack.^[32] From 1594, Shakespeare's plays were performed exclusively by the playing company known usually as the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which was owned by a syndicate of players including Shakespeare and became the leading theatrical company in London.^[33] After the death of Queen Elizabeth in 1603, the company came under the patronage of the new king, James I, and changed its name to the King's Men.^[34]

In 1599, some members of the company formed

another partnership, built the Globe, across the Thames, beyond the city limits and the reach of the authorities, and leased it to the playing company. In 1608, the partnership took possession of an indoor theatre, the Blackfriars, leasing that to the playing company in the same way. This interest in both the playing company and the theatre-owning company made Shakespeare wealthy,^[35] enabling him to buy and renovate the second-largest house in Stratford, New Place in 1597, and to purchase a share of the parish tithes in Stratford in 1605 and buy property near the theatre in Blackfriars in 1613.^[36]

Some of Shakespeare's plays were published in quarto editions from 1594; but his name did not appear on title pages until 1598,^[37] by which time his reputation was becoming a selling point.^[38] Shakespeare continued to act in his own and other plays after he had established himself as a playwright. The 1616 edition of Ben Jonson's *Works* names Shakespeare on the cast lists for *Every Man in His Humour* and *Sejanus, His Fall*, produced in 1598 and 1603;^[39] his name is absent, however, from the 1605 cast list for Jonson's *Volpone*, which some scholars interpret as evidence that his acting career was winding down.^[40] The First Folio of 1623 lists Shakespeare as

one of "the Principal Actors in all these Plays"; but we cannot name for certain any of the roles he played.^[41] John Davies of Hereford wrote in 1610 that "good Will" played "kingly" roles,^[42] and in 1709, Rowe passed down a tradition that he played the ghost of Hamlet's father.^[43] Less established traditions have suggested that Shakespeare also played Adam in *As You Like It* and the Chorus in *Henry V*,^[44] though with little scholarly basis.^[45]

Shakespeare divided his time between London and Stratford during his career, but he referred to himself as "William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon" in personal legal documents. In 1596, the year before he bought New Place as his family home in Stratford, Shakespeare was living in the parish of St. Helen's, Bishopsgate, north of the River Thames.^[46] He had moved across the river to Southwark by 1599, the year his company constructed the Globe Theatre there.^[47] By 1604, he had moved north of the river again, lodging in a middle-class neighbourhood north of St Paul's Cathedral with the French Huguenot family of Christopher Mountjoy, a maker of women's wigs and ornamental head dresses.^[48] In 1612, Shakespeare was called as a witness in a court case concerning the marriage settlement of the daughter of the house, Mary, for whose betrothal to the

Mountjoys' apprentice he appears to have once acted as a go-between.^[49] In March 1613, Shakespeare bought a gatehouse in Blackfriars, near the theatre;^[50] and he was in London for several weeks from November 1614 with his son-in-law, John Hall.^[51] In Spring 1615, Shakespeare and six others entered a bill of complaint against Matthew Bacon for withholding various property deeds in Blackfriars, though there is no evidence that Shakespeare attended to the matter in person.^[52]

After 1606–7, Shakespeare wrote fewer plays, and none are attributed to him after 1613.^[53] His last three plays were collaborations, probably with John Fletcher,^[54] who succeeded him as the house playwright for the King's Men.^[55]

Death

Rowe was the first biographer to pass down the tradition that Shakespeare retired to Stratford some years before his death,^[56] but retirement from all work was uncommon at that time.^[57] Shakespeare wrote no known plays after 1613, but he continued to visit London.^[56] He died

on 23 April 1616,
[58] and was
survived by his
wife and two
daughters.
Susanna had
married a
physician, John
Hall, in 1607,[59]
and Judith had
married Thomas
Quiney, a vintner,
two months
before
Shakespeare's
death.[60]

In his will,
Shakespeare
sought to hold his
large estate
together by
leaving the bulk
of it to his elder
daughter Susanna,
[61] and the will stipulated that it be passed down
intact to a male heir.[62] The Quineys had three
children, all of whom died without marrying;[63]



Shakespeare's funerary
monument in Stratford-upon-
Avon

and the Halls had one child, Elizabeth, who married twice but died without children in 1670, ending Shakespeare's direct line.^[64] Shakespeare's will scarcely mentions his wife, Anne, who was probably entitled to one third of his estate automatically, but he did make a point of leaving her "my second best bed", a bequest that has fuelled much scholarly speculation.^[65]

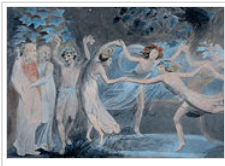
Shakespeare was buried in the chancel of the Holy Trinity Church two days after his death.^[66] Sometime before 1623, a monument was erected in his memory on the north wall, with a half-effigy of him in the act of writing and an inscribed plaque comparing him to Nestor, Socrates, and Virgil.^[67]

Plays

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,^[68] and studies of the texts suggest that *Titus Andronicus*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona* may also belong to Shakespeare's earliest period.^[69] His early histories, which draw heavily

on the 1587 edition of Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*,^[70] dramatise the evil results of weak or corrupt rule and have been seen as justifying the origins of the Tudor dynasty.^[71] Their composition was 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, with their rhetoric and bloodthirstiness.^[72] *The Comedy of Errors* was also based on classical models; but no source for the *The Taming of the Shrew* has been found, though it is related to a separate play with the same name and may have derived from a folk story.^[73] Like *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, in which two friends appear to approve of rape,^[74] the *Shrew's* story of the taming of a woman's independent spirit by a man presents difficulties for modern critics and directors.^[75]

The Italian and classical style of Shakespeare's early comedies gives way in the mid-1590s to the romantic atmosphere of his



greatest
comedies.^[76] *A
Midsummer
Night's Dream* is
a witty mixture of

*Oberon, Titania and Puck with
Fairies Dancing.* By William
Blake, c. 1786. Tate Britain.

romance, fairy magic, and comic low-life scenes;
^[77] but the next comedy, the equally romantic *The
Merchant of Venice*, contains a portrayal of the
vengeful Jewish moneylender Shylock that may
trouble modern audiences as racist.^[78] The wit and
wordplay of *Much Ado About Nothing*,^[79] the
charming rural setting of *As You Like It*, and the
lively merrymaking of *Twelfth Night* complete
Shakespeare's sequence of great comedies.^[80]
After the poetic *Richard II*, Shakespeare
introduced comic writing into the mature histories
of the late 1590s, *Henry IV, parts I 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.^[81] This
period begins and ends with two tragedies: *Romeo
and Juliet*, the famous romantic tragedy of sexually
charged adolescence, love, and death,^[82] and
Julius Caesar—based on Sir Thomas North's 1579
translation of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*—which
introduced a new kind of drama.^[83]



*Hamlet, Horatio, Marcellus,
and the Ghost of Hamlet's
Father. Henry Fuseli, 1780–5.
Kunsthaus Zürich.*

Shakespeare's "tragic period", as it is often termed, lasted from about 1600 to 1608, though he had written tragedies before and also wrote the so-called "problem plays" *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That*

Ends Well during this time.^[84] Many critics believe that Shakespeare's greatest tragedies represent the peak of his art. The hero of the first of them, *Hamlet*, has probably been more discussed than any other Shakespearean character, especially for his famous soliloquy "To be or not to be; that is the question."^[85] Unlike the introverted Hamlet, whose fatal flaw is hesitation, the heroes of the tragedies that followed, *Othello* and *King Lear*, are undone by hasty errors of judgement.^[86] The plots of Shakespeare's tragedies often hinge on such fatal errors or flaws, through which evil overturns order and destroys the hero and those he loves.^[87] In *Othello*, the villain Iago stokes

Othello's sexual jealousy to the point where he murders the innocent wife who loves him.^[88] In *King Lear*, an old king commits the tragic error of giving up his powers to his evil daughters and rejecting his good daughter, triggering scenes of unrelieved cruelty.^[89] In *Macbeth*, the shortest and most compressed of Shakespeare's tragedies,^[90] uncontrollable ambition incites Macbeth and his wife to murder the rightful king and usurp the throne, until their own guilt, assisted by supernatural forces, destroys them in turn.^[91] Shakespeare's 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.^[92]

In his final period, Shakespeare turned to romance or tragicomedy and completed three more major plays: *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. Less bleak and more artificial than the tragedies, these plays are graver in tone than the comedies of the 1590s, but they end with reconciliation and the forgiveness of potentially tragic errors.^[93] Some commentators have seen this change in mood as evidence of a more serene view of life on Shakespeare's part, but it may merely reflect the theatrical fashion of the day.^[94]

Shakespeare collaborated on two further surviving plays, *Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, probably with John Fletcher.^[95]

Performances

It is not clear for whom Shakespeare wrote his early plays; the title page of the 1594 edition of *Titus Andronicus* reveals that it had been acted by three different companies.^[96] After the plagues of 1592–3, Shakespeare's plays were performed by his own company at The Theatre and the Curtain in Shoreditch, north of the Thames.^[97] Londoners flocked there to see the first part of *Henry IV*, Leonard Digges recording, "Let but Falstaff come, Hal, Poins, the rest...and you scarce shall have a room".^[98] When the company found themselves in dispute with their landlord, they pulled The Theatre down and used the timbers to construct the Globe Theatre, the first playhouse built by actors for actors, on the south bank of the Thames at Southwark.^[99] The Globe opened in autumn 1599, with *Julius Caesar* one of the first plays staged. Most of Shakespeare's greatest post-1599 plays were written for the Globe, including *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *King Lear*.^[100]



Reconstructed Globe theatre,
London.

After the Lord Chamberlain's Men were renamed the King's Men in 1603, they entered a special relationship with the new King James.

Performance records are patchy, but we know that the King's Men performed seven of Shakespeare's plays at court between 1 November 1604 and 31 October 1605, including two performances of *The Merchant of Venice*.^[101] After 1608, they performed at the indoor Blackfriars Theatre during the winter and the Globe during the summer.^[102] The indoor setting, combined with the Jacobean vogue for lavishly staged masques, created new conditions for performance which enabled Shakespeare to introduce more elaborate stage devices. In *Cymbeline*, for example, Jupiter descends "in thunder and lightning, sitting upon an eagle: he throws a thunderbolt. The ghosts fall on their knees."^[103]

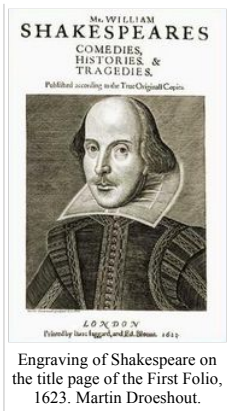
The actors in Shakespeare's company included Richard Burbage, Will Kempe, Henry Condell and John Heminges. Burbage played the leading role in the first performances of many of Shakespeare's plays, including *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*.^[104] The popular comic actor Will Kempe played Peter in *Romeo and Juliet* and Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*, among other parts. He was replaced around the turn of the sixteenth century by Robert Armin, who played roles such as Touchstone in *As You Like It* and the fool in *King Lear*.^[105] In 1613, Sir Henry Wotton recorded that *Henry VIII* "was set forth with many extraordinary circumstances of pomp and ceremony".^[106] On 29 June, however, a cannon set fire to the thatch of the Globe and burned the theatre to the ground, an event which pinpoints the date of a Shakespeare play with rare precision.^[106]

Textual sources

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 the plays. It contained 36 texts,

including 18 printed for the first time.^[107] Many of the plays had already appeared in quarto versions—flimsy books made from sheets of paper folded twice to make four leaves.^[108] No evidence suggests that Shakespeare approved these editions, which the First Folio describes as "stol'n and

surreptitious copies".^[109] Alfred Pollard termed some of them "bad quartos" because of their impure and often garbled texts.^[110] Where several versions of a play survive, each differs from the other. The differences may stem from copying or printing errors, from versions remembered by actors or audience members, and even from



Engraving of Shakespeare on the title page of the First Folio, 1623. Martin Droeshout.

Shakespeare's own papers.^[111] In some cases, for example *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida* and *Othello*, Shakespeare could have revised texts between the quarto and folio editions. The folio version of *King Lear* is so different from the 1608 quarto that the two cannot be combined without loss.^[112]

Poems

In 1593 and 1594, while the theatres were closed because of plague, Shakespeare published two narrative poems on erotic themes, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. He dedicated them to Henry Wriothesley, earl of Southampton. In *Venus and Adonis*, an innocent Adonis rejects the sexual advances of Venus; while in *The Rape of Lucrece*, the virgin Lucrece is raped by the lustful Tarquin.^[113] Influenced by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,^[114] the poems show the guilt and moral confusion that result from uncontrolled lust.^[115] Both earned popularity and many reprints during Shakespeare's lifetime. A third narrative poem, *A Lover's Complaint*, in which a young woman complains of being seduced against her will, was printed in the first edition of the *Sonnets* in 1609. Most scholars now accept that

Shakespeare wrote *A Lover's Complaint*, but critics consider that its successes are marred by leaden effects.^[116] *The Phoenix and the Turtle*, printed in Robert Chester's 1601 *Love's Martyr*, mourns the deaths of the legendary phoenix and his lover, the faithful turtle dove. In 1599, two early drafts of sonnets 138 and 144 appeared in *The Passionate Pilgrim*, published under Shakespeare's name but without his permission.^[117]

Sonnets

"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

Thou art more lovely and more temperate..."

Lines from Shakespeare's *Sonnet 18*.^[118]

Published in 1609, the *Sonnets* were the last of Shakespeare's non-dramatic works to be printed. Scholars are not certain when each of the 154 sonnets was composed, but evidence suggests that Shakespeare wrote sonnets throughout his career for a private readership.^[119] Even before the two unauthorised sonnets appeared in *The Passionate Pilgrim* in 1599, Francis Meres had referred in 1598 to Shakespeare's "sugred Sonnets among his private friends".^[120] Few analysts believe that the

published collection follows Shakespeare's intended sequence.^[121] He seems to have planned two contrasting series: one about uncontrollable lust for a married woman of dark complexion (the "dark lady"), and one about pure love for a fair young man (the "fair youth"); but, despite many theories, it remains unclear if these figures represent real individuals, or if the authorial "I" who addresses them represents Shakespeare himself, though Wordsworth believed that with the sonnets "Shakespeare unlocked his heart".^[122] The 1609 edition was dedicated to a "Mr. W.H.", credited as "the only begetter" of the poems. Whether this was written by Shakespeare himself or by the publisher, Thomas Thorpe, whose initials appear at the foot of the dedication page, is not known; nor is it known who Mr. W.H. was—though theories abound, including that he was the "fair youth" addressed in the text—or whether Shakespeare even authorised the publication.^[123] Despite these difficulties, critics praise the *Sonnets* as a profound meditation on the nature of love, sexual passion, procreation, death, and time.^[124]

Style

Shakespeare wrote his first plays in a stylised

language that does not always spring naturally from the needs of the characters or the drama.^[125] The grand speeches in *Titus Andronicus*, for example, often hold up the action; and much of the verse in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* is stilted.^[126] Soon, however, Shakespeare began to adapt the traditional styles to his own purposes. The opening soliloquy of *Richard III* has its origins in the self-declaration of the Vice in medieval drama, but Richard's vivid self-awareness looks forward to the soliloquies of Shakespeare's mature plays.^[127] No single play marks a change from the traditional to the freer style; Shakespeare combined the two throughout his career, with *Romeo and Juliet* perhaps the best example of the mixing of the styles.^[128] By the time of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard II*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the mid-1590s, Shakespeare was writing a more natural poetry, the metaphors and images increasingly tuned to the needs of the drama itself.

Shakespeare's
standard poetic
form was blank verse, composed in iambic pentameter, but the blank verse of his later plays is quite different from that of his early ones. The early blank verse is often beautiful, but its sentences tend to start, pause, and finish at the end

of lines, with the risk of monotony. [129] Once Shakespeare mastered traditional blank verse, he began to interrupt and vary its flow; this technique contributes to the increased power and flexibility of the poetry in plays such as *Julius Caesar* and

Hamlet. After *Hamlet*, Shakespeare varied his poetic style further, particularly in the more emotional passages of the late tragedies. The literary critic A. C. Bradley described this style as "more concentrated, rapid, varied, and, in construction, less regular, not seldom twisted or elliptical".^[130] In the last phase of his career, Shakespeare adopted many techniques to achieve these effects, including run-on lines, irregular pauses and stops, and extreme variations in sentence structure and length.^[131] In *Macbeth*, for



Pity by William Blake, 1795, Tate Britain, is an illustration of two similes in *Macbeth*: "And pity, like a naked new-born babe, / Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, hors'd / Upon the sightless couriers of the air".

example, the language darts from one metaphor to another ("was the hope drunk when you dressed yourself"; "pity, like a naked new-born babe"), challenging the listener to complete the sense.^[131] The late romances, with their shifts in time and surprising turns of plot, inspired a last poetic style in which, as Charles Lamb wrote, Shakespeare "mingles everything...runs line into line, embarrasses sentences and metaphors".^[132]

Shakespeare's poetic genius was allied with a practical sense of the theatre.^[133] Like all playwrights of the time, Shakespeare dramatised stories from sources such as Petrarch and Holinshed; but his ability to turn this material into theatre surpassed that of his competitors.^[134] He reshaped each plot to create several centres of interest and reveal as many aspects of a narrative to the audience as possible. This strength of design ensures that a Shakespeare play can survive translation, cutting and diverse interpretation without loss to its core drama.^[135] As Shakespeare's mastery grew, he gave his characters clearer and more varied motivations and distinctive patterns of speech. He preserved aspects of his earlier style in the later plays, however, and in his late romances deliberately returned to a more artificial style.^[136]

Influence

Shakespeare created some of the most admired plays in Western literature, with *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* considered among the world's greatest.^[137] By expanding the dramatic possibilities of characterisation, plot, language, and genre, Shakespeare exerted a major influence on subsequent theatre and literature.^[138] In *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, he mixed romance and tragedy to create a new form; until then, romance had not been considered a worthy topic for tragedy.^[139] Shakespeare extended the range of expression of the soliloquy, using it not only to convey information about characters or events but to explore characters' inner motivations and conflict.^[140] His work heavily influenced later poetry; the Romantic poets even attempted to revive Shakespearean verse drama, with little success. Literary critic George Steiner described all English poetic dramas from Coleridge to Tennyson as "feeble variations on Shakespearean themes."^[141]

Shakespeare
influenced many



Macbeth Consulting the Vision of the Armed Head. By Henry Fuseli, 1793–94. Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington.

novelists, including Thomas Hardy,^[142] William Faulkner,^[143] and Charles Dickens. Dickens quoted Shakespeare liberally, taking 25 of his titles from his works.^[144] Herman Melville frequently used Shakespearean devices such as the extended soliloquy, and *Moby Dick's*

protagonist, Captain Ahab, is a classic tragic hero, inspired by *King Lear*.^[145] Scholars have identified 20,000 pieces of music associated with Shakespeare's works, among them two operas by Giuseppe Verdi, *Otello* and *Falstaff*, which have earned a critical standing comparable to that of their source plays.^[146] Shakespeare has also powerfully influenced many painters, including the

Romantics and the Pre-Raphaelites in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.^[147] The Swiss Romantic artist Henry Fuseli, a close associate of William Blake, even translated *Macbeth* into German.^[148]

Shakespeare wrote at a time when English grammar and spelling were not fixed, and his use of language helped shape modern English, particularly during his rise to fame in the eighteenth century, when writers of dictionaries illustrated word use by quoting the best authors.^[149] Samuel Johnson quoted Shakespeare more often than any other author in his *A Dictionary of the English Language*, the first authoritative work of its type;^[150] and other standardization projects helped ensure the absorption of Shakespearean language into English. Many of Shakespeare's coinages and idiomatic expressions, such as "with bated breath" (*Merchant of Venice*) and "a foregone conclusion" (*Othello*), have found their way into everyday English speech.^[151]

The literary critic Harold Bloom suggests that Shakespeare has influenced not only language but identity, claiming that "all of us were, to a shocking degree, pragmatically reinvented by Shakespeare".^[152] He points to Sigmund Freud's

use of Shakespearean psychology, in particular that of Hamlet, in devising his influential theories of human nature, and calls Shakespeare "the inventor of psychoanalysis", with Freud merely its codifier. [153]

Critical reputation

"He was not of an age, but for all time."

Shakespeare's contemporaries were usually generous in their response to his work, but he was never revered during his lifetime.^[155] In 1598, Francis Meres singled him out from a group of English poets as "the most excellent" among English playwrights in both comedy and tragedy.^[156] The authors of the *Parnassus* plays performed at St John's College, Cambridge between 1598 and 1601 mentioned Shakespeare alongside Chaucer, Gower and Spenser.^[157] Ben Jonson, in his prefatory poem to the First Folio, extolled Shakespeare as "Soul of the age, the applause, delight, the wonder of our stage"; though he had once remarked that "Shakespeare wanted art".^[158]

The critical consensus of the Restoration period,

when literary taste favoured the principles of neoclassicism, ranked Shakespeare below John Fletcher and Ben Jonson.^[159] The neoclassical critic Thomas Rymer condemned Shakespeare's mixture of the comic and tragic and his failure to observe the three unities of classical theory. But critic and poet John Dryden, though often critical of Shakespeare, rated him above Fletcher and Jonson, saying of the latter, "I admire him, but I love Shakespeare".^[160] For several decades, Rymer's view held sway; but during the middle years of the eighteenth century, an increasing appreciation of Shakespeare's natural genius began to outweigh the lingering influence of neoclassical criticism; and by the end of the century, Shakespeare was acclaimed as the national poet.^[161] The publication of a series of annotated critical editions of his work, most notably those of Samuel Johnson in 1765 and Edmond Malone in 1790, secured his rise to critical pre-eminence.^[162] In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Shakespeare's works gradually earned a reputation outside Britain, benefiting from the advocacy of Voltaire, Goethe, Stendhal and Victor Hugo.^[163]

During the Romantic era, Shakespeare was championed by such influential



Ophelia (detail). By John Everett Millais, 1851–2. Tate Britain.

figures as the poet and literary philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the critic August Wilhelm Schlegel, whose translations of the plays were influenced by the spirit of German Romanticism.

[164] In the nineteenth century, the critical admiration of Shakespeare's

genius evolved into something approaching adulation.^[165] "That King Shakespeare," wrote the essayist Thomas Carlyle in 1840, "does not he shine, in crowned sovereignty, over us all, as the noblest, gentlest, yet strongest of rallying signs; indestructible".^[166] The Victorians added to Shakespeare's deification by producing his plays as lavish, reverential spectacles, conceived on the grand scale.^[167] At the end of the Victorian

period, the critic and playwright George Bernard Shaw mocked the cult of Shakespeare worship as "bardolatry", declaring that the naturalism of Ibsen had rendered Shakespeare obsolete and disposable. [168]

However, the modernist revolution in the arts during the early twentieth century, far from discarding Shakespeare, eagerly enlisted his work in the service of the avant garde. The Expressionists in Germany and the Futurists in pre-revolutionary Moscow mounted modernist productions of Shakespeare's plays; Marxist playwright and director Bertolt Brecht devised an epic theatre under the influence of Shakespeare; and the poet and critic T. S. Eliot argued decisively against Shaw that Shakespeare's "primitiveness" in effect made him truly modern.^[169] Eliot, along with G. Wilson Knight and the school of New Criticism, led a movement towards a closer reading of Shakespeare's imagery; but by the 1950s, modernism itself had become a historical phenomenon, replaced by a more diverse set of critical imperatives that no longer regarded the literary text as a sacrosanct artefact with a comprehensible set of meanings.^[170] These analytic processes, by the eighties labelled "postmodern", have opened up Shakespeare

scholarship to the insights of movements such as structuralism, feminism, African American studies, and queer studies, which reinterpret Shakespeare in the context of contemporary political and cultural concerns.^[171]

Speculation about Shakespeare

Authorship

Around 150 years after Shakespeare's death, doubts began to emerge about the authorship of Shakespeare's works.^[172] Alternative candidates proposed include Francis Bacon, Christopher Marlowe, and Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford.^[173] Although all alternative candidates are rejected in academic circles, popular interest in the subject, particularly the Oxfordian theory, has continued into the 21st century.^[174]

Religion

Some scholars claim that members of Shakespeare's family were Catholics, at a time when Catholic practice was against the law.^[175] Shakespeare's mother, Mary Arden, certainly came from a pious Catholic family. The strongest

evidence might be a Catholic statement of faith signed by John Shakespeare, found in 1757 in the rafters of his former house in Henley Street. The document is now lost, however, and scholars differ on its authenticity.^[176] In 1591, the authorities reported that John had missed church "for fear of process for debt", a common Catholic excuse.^[177] In 1606, William's daughter Susanna was listed among those who failed to attend Easter communion in Stratford.^[177] Scholars find evidence both for and against Shakespeare's Catholicism in his plays, but the truth may be impossible to prove either way.^[178]

Sexuality

There is little direct evidence of Shakespeare's sexuality. At 18, he married Anne Hathaway, then 26 and pregnant with Susanna, first of their three children, who was born six months later on 26 May 1583. Scholars have pointed to Shakespeare's sonnets, particularly the twenty-six so-called "Dark Lady" sonnets addressed to a married woman, as evidence of affairs with women.^[179] In recent decades, some scholars have detected possible homoerotic allusions in Shakespeare's works, concluding that he may have been bisexual; while

others interpret the same passages as the expression of intense friendship rather than sexual love.^[180]

Bibliography

Further information: List of Shakespeare's works and Chronology of Shakespeare plays

Classification of the plays

Shakespeare's works include the 36 plays printed in the First Folio of 1623, listed below according to their folio classification as comedies, histories and tragedies.^[181] Shakespeare did not write every word of the plays attributed to him; and several show signs of collaboration, a common practice at the time.^[182] Two plays not included in the First



The Plays of William Shakespeare. By Sir John Gilbert, 1849.

Folio, *Pericles*, *Prince of Tyre*, and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, are now accepted as part of the canon, with scholars agreed that Shakespeare made a major contribution to their composition.^[183] No poems were included in the First Folio.

In the late nineteenth century, Edward Dowden classified four of the late comedies as romances, and though many scholars prefer to call them *tragicomedies*, his term is often used.^[184] These plays and the associated *Two Noble Kinsmen* are marked with an asterisk (*) below. In 1896, Frederick S. Boas coined the term "problem plays" to describe four plays: *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, *Troilus and Cressida* and *Hamlet*.^[185] "Dramas as singular in theme and temper cannot be strictly called comedies or tragedies", he wrote. "We may therefore borrow a convenient phrase from the theatre of today and class them together as Shakespeare's problem plays."^[186] The term, much debated and sometimes applied to other plays, remains in use, though *Hamlet* is definitively classed as a tragedy.^[187] The other problem plays are marked below with a double dagger (§).

Plays thought to be only partly written by Shakespeare are marked with a dagger (†) below.

Other works occasionally attributed to him are listed as lost plays or apocrypha.

Listings

Comedies

- *The Tempest**
- *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*
- *The Merry Wives of Windsor*
- *Measure for Measure*†
- *The Comedy of Errors*
- *Much Ado About Nothing*
- *Love's Labour's Lost*
- *A Midsummer Night's*

Histories

- *King John*
- *Richard II*
- *Henry IV, part 1*
- *Henry IV, part 2*
- *Henry V*
- *Henry VI, part 1* [g]
- *Henry VI, part 2*
- *Henry VI, part 3*
- *Richard*

Tragedies

- *Romeo and Juliet*
- *Coriolanus*
- *Titus Andronicus*† [i]
- *Timon of Athens*† [j]
- *Julius Caesar*
- *Macbeth*† [k]
- *Hamlet*
- *Troilus and Cressida*†
- *King Lear*
- *Othello*
- *Antony and*

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|------------------|
| <i>Dream</i> | <i>III</i> | <i>Cleopatra</i> |
| ■ <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> | ■ <i>Henry VIII</i> † ^[h] | |
| ■ <i>As You Like It</i> | | |
| ■ <i>Taming of the Shrew</i> | | |
| ■ <i>All's Well That Ends Well</i> † | | |
| ■ <i>Twelfth Night, or What You Will</i> | | |
| ■ <i>The Winter's Tale</i> * | | |
| ■ <i>Pericles, Prince of Tyre</i> *† ^[e] | | |
| ■ <i>The Two Noble Kinsmen</i> *†
[f] | | |
| ■ <i>Cymbeline</i> * | | |

Poems

- *Shakespeare's Sonnets*
- *Venus and Adonis*
- *The Rape of Lucrece*
- *The Passionate Pilgrim*^[m]
- *The Phoenix and the Turtle*
- *A Lover's Complaint*

Lost plays

- *Love's Labour's Won*
- *Cardenio*[†]
[1]

Apocrypha

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

Notes and references

Notes

- a. ^ Dates use the Julian Calendar. Under the Gregorian calendar, Shakespeare was baptised on May 6 and died on May 3.^[188]
- b. ^ The exact figures are unknowable. See Shakespeare's collaborations and Shakespeare Apocrypha for further details.
- c. ^ Spelling was not fixed in Elizabethan times, hence the variation.^[189]
- d. ^ An essay by Harold Brooks suggests Marlowe's Edward II influenced Shakespeare's *Richard III*,^[190] Other scholars discount this, pointing out that the parallels are commonplace.^[191]
- e. ^ Most scholars believe that *Pericles* was co-written with George Wilkins.^[192]
- f. ^ *The Two Noble Kinsmen* was co-written with John Fletcher.^[193]
- g. ^ *Henry VI, Part I* is often thought to be the work of a group of collaborators; but some scholars, for example Michael Hattaway, believe the play was wholly written by Shakespeare.^[194]

- **h.** ^ *Henry VIII* was co-written with John Fletcher.^[195]
- **i.** ^ Brian Vickers argues that *Titus Andronicus* was co-written with George Peele, though Jonathan Bate, the play's most recent editor for the Arden Shakespeare, believes it to be wholly the work of Shakespeare.^[196]
- **j.** ^ Brian Vickers and others argue that *Timon of Athens* was co-written with Thomas Middleton, though some commentators disagree.^[197]
- **k.** ^ The text of *Macbeth* which survives has plainly been altered by later hands. Most notable is the inclusion of two songs from Thomas Middleton's play *The Witch*. (1615)^[198]
- **l.** ^ *Cardenio* was apparently co-written with John Fletcher.^[199]
- **m.** ^ *The Passionate Pilgrim*, published under Shakespeare's name in 1599 without his permission, includes early versions of two of his sonnets, three extracts from *Love's Labour's Lost*, several poems known to be by other poets, and eleven poems of unknown authorship for which the attribution to Shakespeare has not been disproved.^[200]

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