

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE C.1564 – 1616

Shakespeare is, without question, the world's most famous playwright. Yet, despite his fame, very few records and artefacts exist for him today. We don't even know the exact date of his birth! Traditionally, however, April 23rd 1564 (St George's Day) is taken to be his birthday, as this was three days before his baptism (for which we do have a record). Records also tell us that he died on the same date in 1616, aged fifty-two.



Jon Haward and Gary Erskine

The life of William Shakespeare can be divided into three acts.

Act One – Stratford-upon-Avon

William was the eldest son of tradesman John Shakespeare and Mary Arden, and the third of eight children (he had two older sisters). The Shakespeares were a respectable family. John made gloves and traded leather. The year after William was born, John became an alderman of Stratford-upon-Avon, and four years later he became High Bailiff (or mayor) of the town. Plague and illnesses were common in sixteenth-century England. The Bubonic Plague took the lives of many and was believed to have been the cause of death for three of William's seven siblings.

Little is known of William's childhood. He learnt to read and write at the local primary school, and later he is believed to have attended the local grammar school where he studied Latin and English Literature. In 1582, aged eighteen, William married a local farmer's daughter, Anne Hathaway. Anne was eight years his senior and three months pregnant. During their marriage they had three children: Susanna, born on May 26th 1583 and twins, Hamnet and Judith, born on February 2nd 1585. Hamnet, William's only son, died in 1596, aged eleven, from Bubonic Plague. Interestingly, the play *Hamlet* was written four years later.

Act Two – London

Five years into his marriage, in 1587, William's wife and children stayed in Stratford, while he moved to London. He appeared as an actor at 'The Theatre' (England's first permanent theatre), and gave public recitals of his own poems; but he quickly became famous for his playwriting. His fame soon spread far and wide. When Queen Elizabeth I died in 1603, the new King James I (who was already King James VI of Scotland) gave royal consent for Shakespeare's acting company, "The Lord Chamberlain's Men" to be called "The King's Men" in return for entertaining the court. This association was to shape a number of plays, such as *Macbeth*, which was written to please the Scottish King.

In just twenty-three years, between 1590 and 1613, William Shakespeare is attributed with writing and collaborating on 38 plays, 154 sonnets and 5 poems. No original manuscript exists for any of his plays, making it hard to accurately date them. Printing was still in its infancy, and plays tended to change as they were performed. Shakespeare would write manuscript for the actors and continue to refine them over a number of performances. The plays we know today have survived from written copies taken at various stages of each play and usually written by the actors from memory. This has given rise to variations in texts of what is now known as "quarto" versions of the plays, until we reach the first official printing of each play in the 1623 "folio" *Mr William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*.

In 1599, Shakespeare and his troupe built 'The Globe Theatre' (using timbers from 'The Theatre' which they carried by boat across the River Thames!). This theatre, made even more famous today because of the New Globe Theatre on London's south bank, became the home of Shakespeare's plays, with thousands of people crammed into the small space for each performance. This lasted until 1613, when a cannon-shot during a performance of *Henry VIII* set fire to the thatched roof and the entire theatre was burnt to the ground. Although it was rebuilt a year later, it marked an end to Shakespeare's writing and to his time in London.

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Act Three - Retirement

Shakespeare returned to live with his family in Stratford-upon-Avon. His last documented visit to London was in 1614 – a business trip with his son-in-law John Hall. William Shakespeare died on April 23rd 1616 and was buried two days later at the Church of the Holy Trinity (the same church where he had been baptised fifty-two years earlier). The cause of his death remains unknown.

His gravestone bears these words, believed to have been written by William himself:-

*Good friend for Jesus sake forbear
To dig the dust enclosed here.
Blest be the man that spares these stones,
And curst be he that moves my bones.*

Epilogue

At the time of his death, Shakespeare had substantial properties, which he bestowed on his family and associates from the theatre. He had no son to inherit his wealth, and the fact that he wrote his second will in March 1616 displays an awareness of his likely death. His signature on that will is very shaky. The bulk of his will, including his substantial home, was left to his eldest daughter Susanna. Susanna's husband, John Hall, was the executor of the will. To his other daughter, Judith, he left money and possessions. Curiously, the only thing that he left to his wife Anne was his second-best bed! (although she continued to live in the family home after his death). William Shakespeare's last direct descendant died in 1670. She was his granddaughter, Elizabeth.

TO BE, OR NOT TO BE – THAT IS THE QUESTION	True or False?
1. Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564	
2. His life and times are well documented	
3. Shakespeare's family were very poor	
4. He never went to school	
5. William Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway	
6. The whole Shakespeare family moved to London in 1587	
7. Shakespeare's group of actors performed his plays for King James I	
8. Shakespeare died in London	
9. Shakespeare was buried in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1616	
10. Descendants of Shakespeare are still alive today	

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A (VERY) BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Despite his fame, few records exist for the life of William Shakespeare. He was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, we believe on April 23rd 1564. William was the eldest son of a respectable and reasonably affluent family. His father, John, was a local tradesman who went on to become the mayor of the town.

William learnt to read and write at the local primary school, and later he is believed to have attended grammar school. When he was 18, he married a local farmer's daughter, Anne Hathaway. They had three children together.

Five years later, the family stayed in Stratford while he moved to London. He appeared as an actor and gave public recitals of his own poems; but he quickly became famous for his playwriting. His fame soon spread far and wide. When Queen Elizabeth I died in 1603, the new King James I (who was already King James VI of Scotland) gave royal consent for Shakespeare's acting company to be called "The King's Men" in return for entertaining the court. This association was to shape a number of plays, such as *Macbeth*, which was written to please the Scottish King.

Between around 1590 and 1613, William Shakespeare is attributed with writing and collaborating on 38 plays, 154 sonnets and 5 poems. No original manuscript exists for any of his plays, making it hard to accurately date them and impossible to decide upon a definitive version

In 1599, Shakespeare and his troupe built 'The Globe Theatre'. This theatre became the home of Shakespeare's plays, with thousands of people crammed into the small space for each performance. In 1613, a cannon-shot during a performance of *Henry VIII* set fire to the thatched roof and the entire theatre was burnt to the ground. Although it was rebuilt a year later, it marked an end to Shakespeare's writing and his time in London.

Shakespeare returned to Stratford-upon-Avon and died on April 23rd 1616, aged 52. The cause of his death remains unknown. William Shakespeare's last direct descendant (his granddaughter, Elizabeth) died childless in 1670.

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ROMEO AND JULIET – SHAKESPEARE’S STORY?

Believe it or not, Shakespeare’s talent did not lie in original storytelling. Most of the plots of his plays were stories which existed already in a variety of forms, whether they were through older poems, prose, or based on events which actually happened in history - although he might have changed all of these significantly.

Romeo and Juliet is no different. It was written relatively early in his career, when Shakespeare was in his early thirties (finished around 1595). It was first published in 1597 though it was not a good quality version and was later revised.

In many ways, the play is rooted in tradition. The theme of young lovers thwarted by events beyond their control is almost as ancient as storytelling itself and some academics say it can be traced back as far as the birth of Christ, to Roman writer Ovid’s “Pyramus and Thisbe” in which the parents hate each other and Pyramus wrongly believes his lover Thisbe is dead.

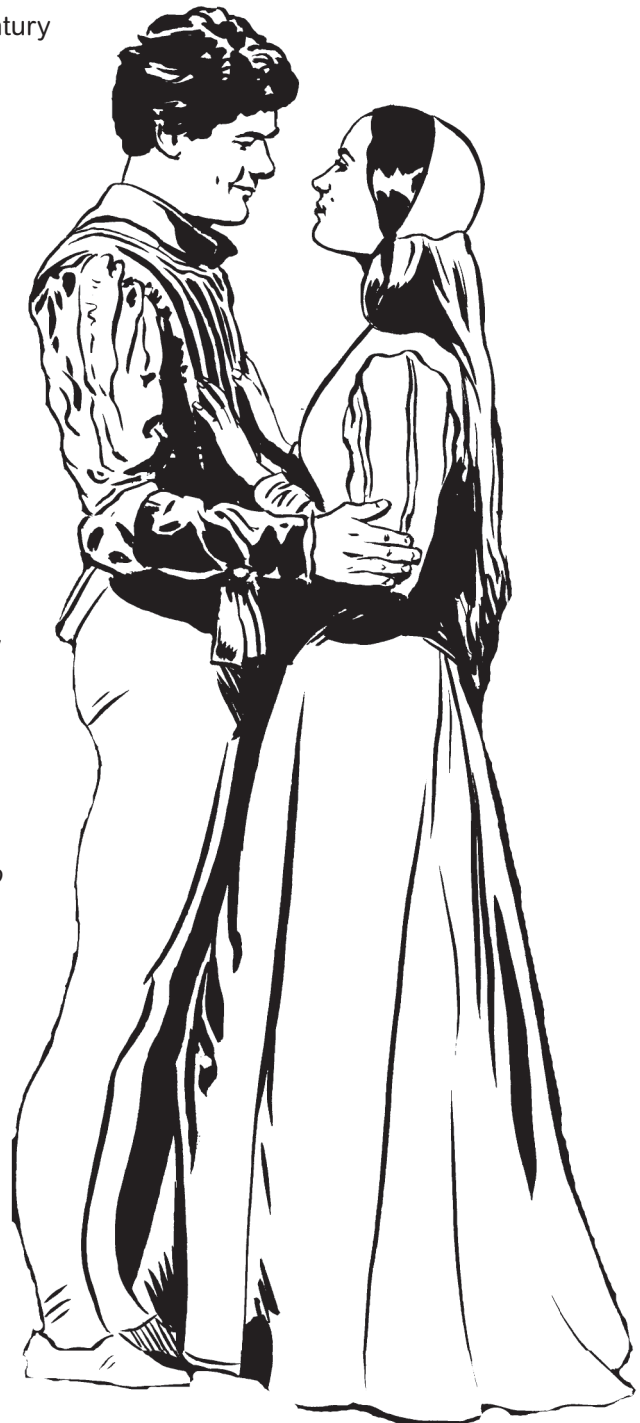
There is also a clear link to a book from the third century AD and one of the earliest novels ever written, the “Ephesiaca” by ancient Greek writer Xenophon of Ephesus.

In the 1400s the tale became popular in Italy and France and was expanded to include more details, some of which can be recognised in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. In 1562, two years before Shakespeare’s birth, an English poet called Arthur Brooke composed a narrative poem called *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet* which was a translation of earlier Italian and French efforts.

Twenty years later in 1582, another English author called William Painter included a version of the story in his prose work *Palace of Pleasure*. The works of Brooke and Painter were used heavily by Shakespeare for his plot and some of his characterisation.

One of the most often asked questions about *Romeo and Juliet* is “Is it a true story?” The answer is probably “no”, though some true romantics believe to have evidence proving that it took place. It is true that in thirteenth-century Italy there were two very powerful rival families – the Montecchis and the Capellettis. The Montecchis even lived in Verona. But the Capellettis lived in Cremona which is over an hour away...by car!

It is definitely “true” in the sense that very similar things have happened to young people since the beginning of time – and are still happening today.



FAMOUS SHAKESPEARE QUOTES

TASK:

Shakespeare is probably the most quoted writer in the history of English Literature. Here is a small selection of the wise words of William Shakespeare. What do you think the quotes mean?

WISE WORDS	YOUR INTERPRETATION:
<p>“Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player, That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, And then is heard no more. It is a tale Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing.” <i>Macbeth</i></p>	
<p>“As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods, They kill us for their sport.” <i>King Lear</i></p>	
<p>“Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul But I do love thee! and when I love thee not, Chaos is come again.” <i>Othello</i></p>	
<p>“Neither a borrower nor a lender be, For loan oft loses both itself and friend, And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.” <i>Hamlet</i></p>	
<p>“Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.” <i>Henry VI, Part II</i></p>	
<p>“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, His acts being seven ages.” <i>As You Like It</i></p>	

FAMOUS SHAKESPEARE QUOTES

WISE WORDS	YOUR INTERPRETATION:
<p>“All that glisters is not gold.” <i>The Merchant of Venice</i></p>	
<p>“The course of true love never did run smooth;” <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i></p>	
<p>“Cowards die many times before their deaths, The valiant never taste of death but once.” <i>Julius Caesar</i></p>	
<p>“Why then the world's mine oyster, Which I with sword will open.” <i>The Merry Wives of Windsor</i></p>	
<p>“The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers.” <i>Henry VI</i></p>	
<p>“Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more; Or close the wall up with our English dead. In peace there's nothing so becomes a man As modest stillness and humility; But when the blast of war blows in our ears, Then imitate the action of the tiger...” <i>Henry V</i></p>	