

William Shakespeare: The Man Behind the Words

Throughout the decades, William Shakespeare has come to be revered as one of the greatest playwrights in the history of theatre. Not only are his works continually performed all over the world, but numerous theatres exist solely to produce his plays.

Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, England on April 23, 1564. He came from a family described as “honest, hard-working, middle-class stock.” He received minimal education and by the time he was 18 he was married to a girl by the name of Anne Hathaway. His first daughter, Susanna, was born the next year, followed by his twins, Hamlet and Judith, in 1585.

In the late 1580s, Shakespeare moved to London (96 miles away — about a four-day walk — from Stratford) in an attempt to financially support his family through the theatre. He began as an actor, but soon started writing plays and poetry as well. By 1592, he was known throughout the London theatre scene as an up-and-coming young artist.

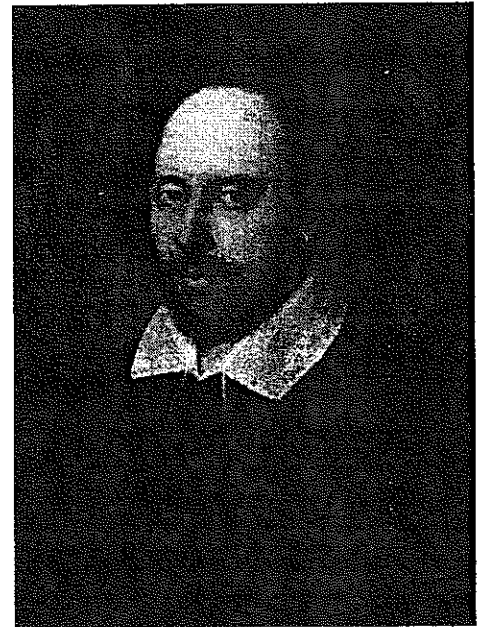
In the spring of 1594, Shakespeare joined a company of actors known as the Lord Chamberlain’s Company, called such because they were under the patronage of the Chamberlain to Queen Elizabeth I. The troupe began performing at the Theatre, but when their lease on the land expired, they took matters into their own hands. Illegally dismantling the Theatre and carrying its timbers across the Thames River, the company built what would become one of the most famous theatres in England: the Globe.

Soon after the move, Shakespeare became the principal playwright for the company, providing actors with approximately two plays a year. He was also highly involved in the management of the troupe and received a share of all profits. During this period, Shakespeare gained recognition as one of England’s premiere playwrights, while each of his plays received tremendous popular acclaim.

In 1603, when King James I was crowned after Queen Elizabeth’s death, Shakespeare’s troupe became known as the King’s Men and often performed in the King’s court. They were now recognized as Grooms of the Chamber, or minor court officials. At this time, Shakespeare gave up acting completely and served the company exclusively as a playwright and manager.

In 1611, Shakespeare retired to his home in Stratford, where his wife and children had remained all these years, supposedly to spend time in “ease, retirement, and the conversation of friends.” By this point, he had come to be quite a wealthy man and was able to live comfortably.

Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616. Those who knew him remembered him as “a handsome well shaped man, very good company, and of a ready and pleasant wit.” Today he is remembered for his literary genius and timeless stories.



*Portrait of William Shakespeare
by Unknown Artist*

FUN FACT

No one really knows when Shakespeare was born. Tradition holds that his birthday is April 23, 1564. However, all we know for sure is that he was baptized three days later at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon. April 23 became popularly established as his birthday after he died on the same day in 1616.