

# Literary Lives: William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare is regarded as one of the greatest playwrights in English literary history. Although he died over 400 years ago, his works continue to be widely performed today and are a compulsory part of the curriculum in many schools. There are more than 400 feature films of his plays, and his works have been translated into over 118 languages. He is the best-selling writer of all time, with estimated sales of up to four billion books.

## Early Life

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire. The exact date of his birth is unknown, but he was baptised on 26th April 1564. In Renaissance England, babies were usually baptised within days of being born, so his birthday is celebrated on 23rd April.

William was the son of John and Mary Shakespeare. His father was a glove-maker and

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merchant, and was a well-known figure in Stratford-upon-Avon, a small market town. He held many positions of responsibility within the town, including an office equivalent to that of mayor today. William's mother came from a farm in Wilmcote, just outside Stratford-upon-Avon. The Shakespeares had eight children, although three of them died very young; William was the eldest surviving male.

William was educated at the local grammar school, where he would have learnt to read and write; he also got a good grounding in classical Greek and Latin literature, which he would later put to use in his plays. Relatively little is known about his life as a young man, but there are stories that he got himself into a few scrapes – including stealing a deer from the grounds of a local manor house!

In 1582, when he was eighteen, William married Anne Hathaway, a twenty-six-year-old local woman. The marriage appears to have been arranged in haste; only one set of banns (the notification of a marriage, usually read out three times in church) were read. A mere

six months later, Anne gave birth to their first child, Susanna. Two further children followed: Judith and Hamnet. Sadly, Hamnet died in 1596.



## Religious Beliefs

Religion was something of a hot topic in Shakespeare's time. In order to grasp its relevance, it is important to understand that religion played an important part in people's lives: attendance at church was demanded, and marriages, baptisms and funerals all took place in church. The church was ingrained in people's lives and a focal point for communities.

Up until the reign of Henry VIII, England had been a Roman Catholic country, recognising the religious authority of the Pope. But when Henry VIII broke away from Rome in 1534, there followed a period of religious uncertainty, with England swinging between Catholicism and Protestantism, depending on the monarch at the time.

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Because of the religious turmoil, it would have been dangerous for Shakespeare to comment openly on religion, particularly Catholicism, as England under Queen Elizabeth was a

Protestant country. But scholars have found some subtle Catholic references within his plays, and it is believed that Shakespeare's father could have been a secret Catholic – a Catholic pamphlet was found hidden in the rafters of Shakespeare's birthplace.

We do know that Shakespeare would have been required to attend church regularly and services would have been given in English. This was a relatively new concept, as all services had been in Latin under the Catholic church. The church was still an essential part of life – indeed, the law said that everyone had to go to church every week. The church taught that everyone has a soul, which could be damned eternally if you did something terrible, such as commit murder. Heaven and hell were considered to be real. Sex outside of wedlock was thought a grave sin, which might explain Shakespeare's hasty marriage to Anne Hathaway.

## A Career in the Capital

At some point in the late 1580s, William moved to London. We don't know exactly when this happened, but we do know that his family stayed in Stratford-upon-Avon. In the capital, William worked as an actor and playwright.

### Shakespeare in numbers:

**3:** number of children with Anne Hathaway.

**52:** age at death.

**154:** number of sonnets written by Shakespeare.

**234:** number of copies of the 'First Folio' that survive.

**3,000:** number of people who could fit into The Globe, Shakespeare's theatre.

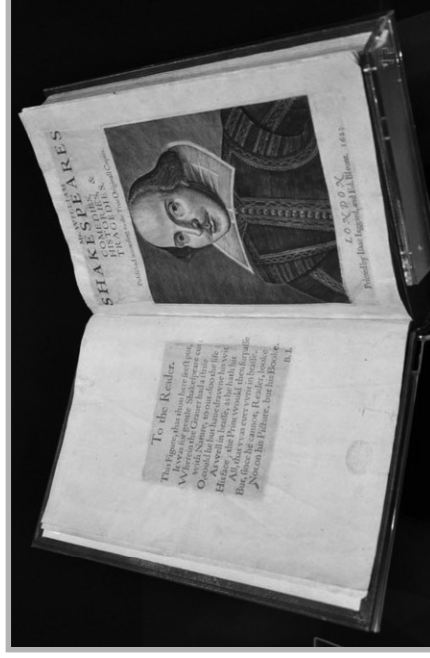
**4,000,000,000:** estimated sales of Shakespeare works.

Again, little is known about the exact date that his first plays were published, but he had certainly written some by 1592. He would have acted in his own plays.

In 1593, the bubonic plague broke out in London and theatres were closed until the following year to avoid the spread of the deadly disease. During this time, it's thought that Shakespeare took up poetry-writing, including sonnets – fourteen-line poems which follow a classical form.

William also owned a share in a theatre company, known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men. When Queen Elizabeth I died in 1603, King James I came to the throne and granted the theatre company his royal seal of approval: they became The King's Men.

William's success as a playwright grew steadily, and his plays became exceedingly popular. They are generally divided into the categories of comedies, tragedies and histories (plays telling the stories of kings and queens of England). He is believed to have written around 42 plays and 154 sonnets. It was not until after his death that the majority of his plays were collected into one volume, known as the 'First Folio'.

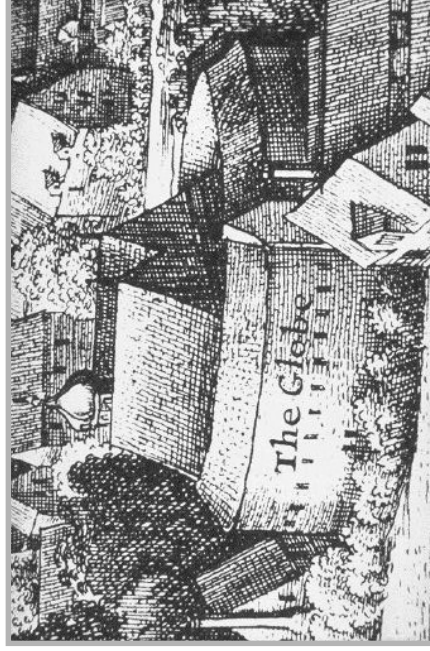


The 'First Folio'

There are only 234 surviving copies of the 'First Folio', with a combined value of £1.1bn.

### The Globe Theatre

In 1597, William was part of a group of actors and producers who built a theatre called The Globe on London's South Bank. This location was important: it was outside the boundaries of the City of London, and therefore could not be controlled by officials who were generally disapproving of theatres. (Theatre was not popular with everyone – The Puritans were a religious movement who managed to get theatre banned altogether in 1642.) The South Bank already had two other popular theatres: The Rose and The Swan.



The Old Globe Theatre

The theatre was finished in 1599 and many of William's plays were performed there. Made of a combination of bricks and timber, The Globe could hold up to 3,000 people. It was a round building with a central yard which was open to the sky. Poorer theatre-goers stood in the yard to watch plays, and were known as 'groundlings'. Richer audience members could sit on wooden benches in galleries under the thatched roof which went around the outside of the yard. The wealthiest of all could hire cushions for their seats.

Audience members ranged from poor servants to rich aristocracy. Food and drink were available, such as oranges, nuts and beer. The theatre-going experience was much rowdier than it is today – audiences would heckle or boo the villains and cheer their heroes. It was also not uncommon for fights to break out!

The stage was covered with a roof, known as 'the heavens', to keep the actors dry and had a 'tiring house', where the actors changed their costumes, behind it. Acting was not easy – there was a high turnover of plays as audiences were so large. Roles had to be learnt quickly, and actors were never given a whole copy of their

play – just their part with their cue-lines written in. Acting was an exclusively male profession, as it was considered scandalous for women to appear on the stage. Characters such as Juliet from ‘Romeo and Juliet’ were played by young boys whose voices had not yet matured.

Costumes were often lavish and purchased second-hand from aristocracy. Special effects were expected by the audiences, too. These included sound effects of storms and occasional lightning flashes. In fact, it was these effects which were to cause the theatre’s demise: in 1613, The Globe Theatre burned to the ground when a cannon from a performance of ‘Henry VIII’ set light to the thatched roof. The company built a new theatre on the site of the ruins.

## Return Home

**On 23rd April 1616, believed to be the same day as his birth, Shakespeare died.**

Throughout his time in London, William is thought to have travelled back to see his family in Stratford-upon-Avon. When he became more successful as a playwright, he bought a large house for his family in his home town. New

Place was one of the most prominent houses in Stratford-upon-Avon, and was a visible symbol of his success as a writer. William is believed to have written some of his later plays there, including ‘The Tempest’.

Shakespeare returned to Stratford-upon-Avon for good in around 1613. On 23rd April 1616, believed to be the same day as his birth, Shakespeare died. Although his cause of death is not known, a diary entry from the vicar of Stratford-upon-Avon at the time says William had a ‘fever’ which was brought on from drinking too much with the playwrights Ben Jonson and Michael Drayton.

Shakespeare was buried in Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon. His tomb (along with his birthplace, Anne Hathaway’s house, his mother’s farm and New Place) can still be visited today. It is inscribed with the following warning:

**‘Good friend, for Jesus’ sake forebears,  
To digg the dust enclosed here;  
Bleste be the man that spares the stones,  
And curst be he that moves my bones.’**



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## Shakespeare's grave

### Shakespeare Quotations:

‘To be or not to be; that is the question’  
('Hamlet')

‘Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon ‘em.’ ('Twelfth Night')

‘How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is / To have a thankless child!’ ('King Lear')

‘Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? / Thou art more lovely and more temperate.’  
(Sonnet 18)

‘We are such stuff as dreams are made on’  
('The Tempest')