

William Shakespeare | Shakespeare: An Introduction

I. Introduction Any discussion of Shakespeare's life is bound to be loaded with superlatives. In the course of a quarter century, Shakespeare wrote some thirty-eight plays. Taken individually, several of them are among the world's finest written works; taken collectively, they establish Shakespeare as the foremost literary talent of his own Elizabethan Age and, even more impressively, as a genius whose creative achievement has never been surpassed in any age.

In light of Shakespeare's stature and the passage of nearly four centuries since his death, it is not surprising that hundreds of Shakespeare biographies have been written in all of the world's major languages. Scanning this panorama, most accounts of the Bard's life (and certainly the majority of modern studies) are contextual in the sense that they place the figure of Shakespeare against the rich tapestry of his "Age" or "Times" or "Society." This characteristic approach to Shakespeare biography is actually a matter of necessity, for without such fleshing out into historical, social, and literary settings, the skeletal character of what we know about Shakespeare from primary sources would make for slim and, ironically, boring books. As part of this embellishment process, serious scholars continue to mine for hard facts about the nature of Shakespeare's world. The interpretation of their meaning necessarily varies, often according to the particular school or ideology of the author.

Whatever the differences of opinion, valid or at least plausible views about Shakespeare, his character and his personal experience continue to be advanced. Yet even among modern Shakespeare biographies, in addition to outlandish interpretations of the available facts, there persists (and grows) a body of traditions about such matters as Shakespeare's marriage, his move to London, the circumstances of his death and the like. The result of all this is that there is now a huge tapestry of descriptive, critical, and analytical work about Shakespeare in existence, much of it reasonable, some of it outlandish, and some of it hogwash.

II. Three important points about Shakespeare In examining Shakespeare's life, three broad points should be kept in mind from the start. First, despite the frustration of Shakespeare biographers with the absence of a primary source of information written during (or even shortly after) his death on 23 April 1616 (his fifty-second birthday), Shakespeare's life is not obscure. In fact, we know more about Shakespeare's life, its main events and contours, than we know about most famous Elizabethans outside of the royal court itself. Shakespeare's life is unusually well-documented: there are well over 100 references to Shakespeare and his immediate family in local parish, municipal, and commercial archives and we also have at least fifty observations about Shakespeare's plays (and through them, his life) from his contemporaries. The structure of Shakespeare's life is remarkably sound; it is the flesh

of his personal experience, his motives, and the like that have no firm basis and it is, of course, this descriptive content in which we are most interested.

Second, the appeal of seeing an autobiographical basis in Shakespeare's plays and poetry must be tempered by what the bulk of the evidence has to say about him. Although there are fanciful stories about Shakespeare, many centering upon his romantic affairs, connections between them and the events or characters of his plays are flimsy, and they generally disregard our overall impression of the Bard. In his personal life, Shakespeare was, in fact, an exceedingly practical individual, undoubtedly a jack of many useful trades, and a shrewd businessman in theatrical, commercial and real estate circles.

Third, the notion that plays ascribed to Shakespeare were actually written by others (Sir Francis Bacon, the poet Phillip Sidney among the candidates) has become even weaker over time. The current strong consensus is that while Shakespeare may have collaborated with another Elizabethan playwright in at least one instance (probably with John Fletcher on *The Two Noble Kinsman*), and that one or two of his plays were completed by someone else (possibly Fletcher on an original or revised version of *Henry VIII*), the works ascribed to Shakespeare are his.

III. Birth and Early Life Parish records establish that William Shakespeare was baptized on 26 April, 1564. Simply counting backwards the three customary days between birth and baptism in Anglican custom, most reckon that the Bard of Avon was born on 23 April, 1564. This is, indeed, Shakespeare's official birthday in England, and, it is also the traditional birth date of St. George, the patron saint of England. The exact date and the precise cause of Shakespeare's death are unknown: one local tradition asserts that the Bard died on 23 April, 1616, of a chill caught after a night of drinking with fellow playwrights Ben Jonson and Michael Drayton. Shakespeare was, in fact, buried three days later, exactly 52 years after his baptism.

Shakespeare was born and raised in the picturesque Tudor market town of Stratford-on-Avon, a local government and commercial center within a larger rural setting, and it is likely that the surrounding woodlands of his boyhood were reflected in the play *As You Like It*, with its Forest of Arden. Shakespeare's mother Mary Arden was a daughter of the local gentry, holding extensive properties around Stratford-on-Avon in his name. In marrying Shakespeare's father, the glover and tenant farmer John Shakespeare, Mary Arden took a step down the social ladder of the Elizabethan Age, for her husband was of the yeoman class, a notch or two below the gentry. Yet long before his son's fame as a playwright fell to his good fortune, John Shakespeare's talents enabled him to rise modestly on his own accord as he became a burgess member of the town council. Despite evidence of a family financial setback when William was fifteen, Shakespeare's family was comfortable, if not privileged. Shakespeare's eventual fame and success spilled over to his parents in the form of both money and title, and on the eve of his death in 1601, Queen Elizabeth granted the Bard's father a "gentleman's" family coat-of-arms.

We have good cause to believe that Shakespeare attended Stratford Grammar School where he would have received a tuition-free education as the son of a burgess father. There young William was exposed to a standard Elizabethan curriculum strong on Greek and Latin literature (including the playwrights Plautus and Seneca, and the amorous poet Ovid), rhetoric (including

that of the ancient Roman orator Cicero), and Christian ethics (including a working knowledge of the Holy Bible). These influences are pervasive in Shakespeare's works, and it is also apparent that Shakespeare cultivated a knowledge of English history through chronicles written shortly before and during his adolescence. Shakespeare left school in 1579 at the age of fifteen, possibly as the result of a family financial problem. Shakespeare did not pursue formal education any further: he never attended a university and was not considered to be a truly learned man.

There is a period in Shakespeare's life of some seven years (1585 to 1592) from which we have absolutely no primary source materials about him. We do know that in November of 1582, at the age of eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway (a woman eight years his senior), and that she gave birth to a daughter, Susanna, six months later. Two years after that, the Shakespeares had twins: Hamnet and Judith. Hamnet, Shakespeare's only son, would die at the age of eleven. Speculation has it that Shakespeare was not happy in his marriage, and that this may have played a role in his decision to move to London's theater scene. In fact, during the late 1580s and early 1590s, Shakespeare traveled back and forth between London and Stratford-on-Avon, but by this time, the momentum of Shakespeare's life was toward his career and away from family, hearth, and home. Although we lack hard facts, we may surmise that before he took up a career as a playwright, Shakespeare engaged in a variety of occupations, probably working with his father in commercial trades (leathers and grains), probably working as a law clerk, and possibly serving as a soldier or sailor for an England threatened by Spain. Shakespeare displays a command of the argot and the practices of many such crafts, as in his portrayal of the law profession in trial scenes of *The Merchant of Venice*.

IV. The Playwright Between the early 1590s (*The Comedy of Errors*) and the second decade of the seventeenth century (*The Tempest* written in 1611), Shakespeare composed the most extraordinary body of works in the history of world drama. His works are often divided into periods, moving roughly from comedies to histories to tragedies and then to his final romances capped by a farewell to the stage in *The Tempest*. The question of how and whether the Bard's career should be divided into periods aside, we do know that Shakespeare received a major boost in 1592 (the earliest review of his work that we have), when playwright-critic Robert Greene condemned the future Bard as an impudent "upstart" beneath the notice of established literary men or University Wits. Greene's critical diatribe was soon retracted by his editor as a number of leading Elizabethan literary figures expressed their admiration for his early plays. Retreating from London in the plague years of 1592 through 1594, Shakespeare briefly left playwriting aside to compose long poems like *Venus and Adonis* and at least some of his sonnets. But during this period, Shakespeare garnered the support of his first major sponsor, the Earl of Southampton. Soon, as a leading figure in the Chamberlain's Men company he would garner even greater patronage from the courts of Queen Elizabeth and her successor, King James.

Just as the rise of Shakespeare's success, popularity, and fame began to accelerate, he experienced a personal tragedy when his son Hamnet died in 1596. Shakespeare undoubtedly returned to Stratford for Hamnet's funeral and this event may have prompted him to spend more time with his wife and daughters. In 1597, Shakespeare purchased a splendid Tudor Mansion in his hometown known as the New Place. During the period between 1597 and 1611, Shakespeare apparently spent most of his time in London during the theatrical season, but was active in

Stratford as well, particularly as an investor in grain dealings. Shakespeare also purchased real estate in the countryside and in London as well, the latter including Blackfriar's Gatehouse which he bought in 1613. In 1612, four years before his death, Shakespeare went into semi-retirement at the relatively young age of forty-eight. He died on or about 23 April of 1616 of unknown causes.

William Shakespeare's family lineage came to an end two generations after his death. His two daughters followed different paths in their father's eyes. His older daughter, Susanna, married a prominent local doctor, John Hall, in 1607 and there are indications that a close friendship developed between Hall and his renowned father-in-law. Susanna gave Shakespeare his only grandchild, Elizabeth Hall in 1608. Although she inherited the family estate and was married twice (her first husband dying) Elizabeth had no children of her own. Shakespeare's other daughter, Judith married Thomas Quiney, a tavern owner and reputed rake given to pre-marital and extramarital affairs and the fathering of illegitimate children. They had three legitimate sons, all of whom died young.

V. Shakespeare's World Most of Shakespeare's career unfolded during the monarchy of Elizabeth I, the Great Virgin Queen from whom the historical period of the Bard's life takes its name as the Elizabethan Age. Elizabeth came to the throne under turbulent circumstances in 1558 (before Shakespeare was born) and ruled until 1603. Under her reign, not only did England prosper as a rising commercial power at the expense of Catholic Spain, Shakespeare's homeland undertook an enormous expansion into the New World and laid the foundations of what would become the British Empire. This ascendance came in the wake of the Renaissance and the Reformation, the former regaining Greek and Roman classics and stimulating an outburst of creative endeavor throughout Europe, the latter transforming England into a Protestant/Anglican state, and generating continuing religious strife, especially during the civil wars of Elizabeth's Catholic sister, Queen Margaret or "Bloody Mary."

The Elizabethan Age, then, was an Age of Discovery, of the pursuit of scientific knowledge, and the exploration of human nature itself. The basic assumptions underpinning feudalism/Scholasticism were openly challenged with the support of Elizabeth and, equally so, by her successor on the throne, James I. There was in all this an optimism about humanity and its future and an even greater optimism about the destiny of England in the world at large. Nevertheless, the Elizabethans also recognized that the course of history is problematic, that Fortune can undo even the greatest and most promising, as Shakespeare reveals in such plays as *Antony & Cleopatra*. More specifically, Shakespeare and his audiences were keenly aware of the prior century's prolonged bloodshed during the War of the Roses between the houses of Lancaster and York. Many Elizabethans, particularly the prosperous, feared the prospect of civil insurrection and the destruction of the commonwealth, whether as a result of an uprising from below or of usurpation at the top. Thus, whether or not we consider Shakespeare to have been a political conservative, his histories, tragedies and even his romances and comedies are slanted toward the restoration or maintenance of civil harmony and the status quo of legitimate rule.