



William Shakespeare

To the Reader.

**This Figure, that thou here seest put,
It was for gentle Shakespeare cut,
Wherein the Graver had a strife
with Nature, to out-doo the life :
O, could he but have drawne his wit
As well in brasse, as he hath hit
His face ; the Print would then surpasse
All, that was ever writ in brasse.
But, since he cannot, Reader, looke
Not on his Picture, but his Booke.**

Ben Jonson's Commendation of the Droeshout engraving - first published 1623.

A Brief Biography of William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare was born on April 23, 1564 in Stratford-on-Avon, Warwickshire, England. He was the most documented Elizabethan playwright recognized in his own lifetime. Shakespeare is generally acknowledged to be one of the most extraordinary writers in history. No other writer's plays have been produced so many times in so many countries. His creative power is one of the great features of his genius, and to many people Hamlet, or King Lear seem far more real than historical characters like Caesar.

John Shakespeare, William's father, was a highly successful and respected businessman of high status who held many public official positions. He was mayor, a member of the town council, and also justice of the peace yet he was not able to write. Shakespeare's mother was Mary Arden. She had come from a wealthy family that had paid a handsome dowry to marry her off. While living on Henley Street, she bore eight children. In 1576, when William was twelve years old, John Shakespeare's business failed. He subsequently stopped attending meetings and social events.

William was sent to Stratford Grammar School where he was taught by two Oxford graduates, Simon Hunt and Thomas Jenkins. They gave him the incentive to study the classics written in Greek and Latin. Shakespeare was said to possess an unusually keen sense of observation with regard to nature and mankind. After this point, he no longer pursued a formal education.

On November 27, 1582, Shakespeare married twenty-eight year old Anne Hathaway. On May 26, of the next year, Ann bore their first daughter, Susanna. Two years later, a set of twins were born, Judith and Hamnet. Unfortunately, Hamnet died at the age of eleven in 1596. No information is available on Shakespeare between the years of 1585-1592. This period is referred to as "The Lost Years".

During this time, many people suspected that he had run away from the law. It is speculated that he was fleeing prosecution for poaching deer on the property of a local nobleman; or had become a butcher's apprentice, or even a school teacher. Shakespeare's whereabouts were simply unknown until 1592 when he resurfaced in London. He soon established himself as an actor and also began writing plays. In 1593, he found a patron by the name of Henry Wriothsley. During this time, he wrote two long poems. The first, "Venus and Adonius", was written in 1593 and "The Rape of Lucrece" in 1594. The theaters which had been closed for a time due to an outbreak of The Plague had reopened that same year.

Shakespeare worked for the "Lord Chamberlain's Men" company of players which later became "The King's Men". The company built the Globe Theatre in 1597. As an actor, writer, director, and a stockholder in "The King's Men" company, Shakespeare had multiple sources of income and was becoming very wealthy. He bought a house on Silver Street, where he and his family lived until 1606 when he moved to a location near the Globe. The acting company had become the largest and most famous due to the fact Shakespeare worked for them as an actor and his plays were performed regularly. In 1609, all 154 of his sonnets were published by Thomas Thorpe although the publication was not authorized or seen through by the author. In 1610, he returned to Stratford, living as a country gentleman at his house, New Place.

[At that time, Richard Burbage was considered the greatest actor of the day. Richard's father, James, was the first to build a theater in London in 1576, aptly called "The Theater". In 1599, "The Globe Theatre" was built; designed in a circular shape. The plays in this theater usually ran for three days. The first day, expenses were paid, the second day, the actors were paid, and the third day, the playwright was paid. Other theaters were to follow: "The Curtain", "The Rose", "The Swan", "The Fortune", "The Red Bull" and "The Hope"]

Shakespeare left London in 1611 and retired. On March 25, 1616, he made out his will and subsequently died on April 23, 1616 at the age of fifty-two. The cause of his death was unknown. At that time, bodies in overcrowded cemeteries were desecrated by people who robbed them of their clothes and then burned the bodies. It is believed by many that Shakespeare knew he was dying. In order to protect the sanctity of his eternal resting place, he wrote his own epitaph:

"Good frend for Jesus sake forbear
To digg the dust enclosed heare;
Blese be ye man yt spares these stones
And curst be he yt moves my bones "

Pervasive superstition prevented anyone from bothering his grave. After Shakespeare's death, his work was compiled into what was called the First Folio and published in 1623. All in all, Shakespeare created 13 Comedies, 10 Histories, 10 Tragedies, 5 Romances and 6 works of Poetry - a prolific and masterful life's work.



Please note:

This short biography is meant to present a general overview of the life of William Shakespeare. The information has been compiled from various Internet sources, including an anonymous contributor at this Internet address: <http://168.216.219.18/projects/shakesp/shakesp.htm>, "The Life and Times of William Shakespeare", <http://daphne.palomar.edu/shakespeare> and <http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/shakes.htm> and "The Riverside Shakespeare"

There are inconsistencies and contradictions in several areas pertaining to Shakespeare's life. These become more obvious and frequent when one uses the Internet as a primary sole source of information; especially on sites where the sources of information are not acknowledged. The authorship of some plays attributed to William Shakespeare has been a contentious issue for years. The estimates on the number of plays written by Shakespeare varies from 28 to 38 depending on the source. "The Lost Years" have also been referred to as "The Hidden Years". Some historical time lines are different and there are instances of Old English being updated somewhat to modern English. On one site, the aforementioned Shakespeare epitaph has been changed to:

"Good Friends, for Jesus' sake forbear,
To dig the bones enclosed here!
Blest be the man that spares these stones,
And curst be he that moves my bones."

This illustrates the point that much information on the Internet must be taken with a grain of salt. It is always a good rule of thumb to cross-reference. Usually, one can find the *most* reliable sources of information outside of the Internet in a library or book store.

"The Riverside Shakespeare" © 1974 by Houghton Mifflin Company, available in most libraries, is a valuable and comprehensive resource on the works, life and times of William Shakespeare.

Other books dealing specifically with the sonnets are **"An Introduction to Shakespeare's Sonnets for Historians and Others"** by J. Dover Wilson and **"The Riddle of Shakespeare's Sonnets"**, interpretive essays by R.P Blackmur, Leslie A. Fiedler, Northrop Frye, Edward Hubler, Stephen Spender and Oscar Wilde ("The Portrait of Mr. W.H.").