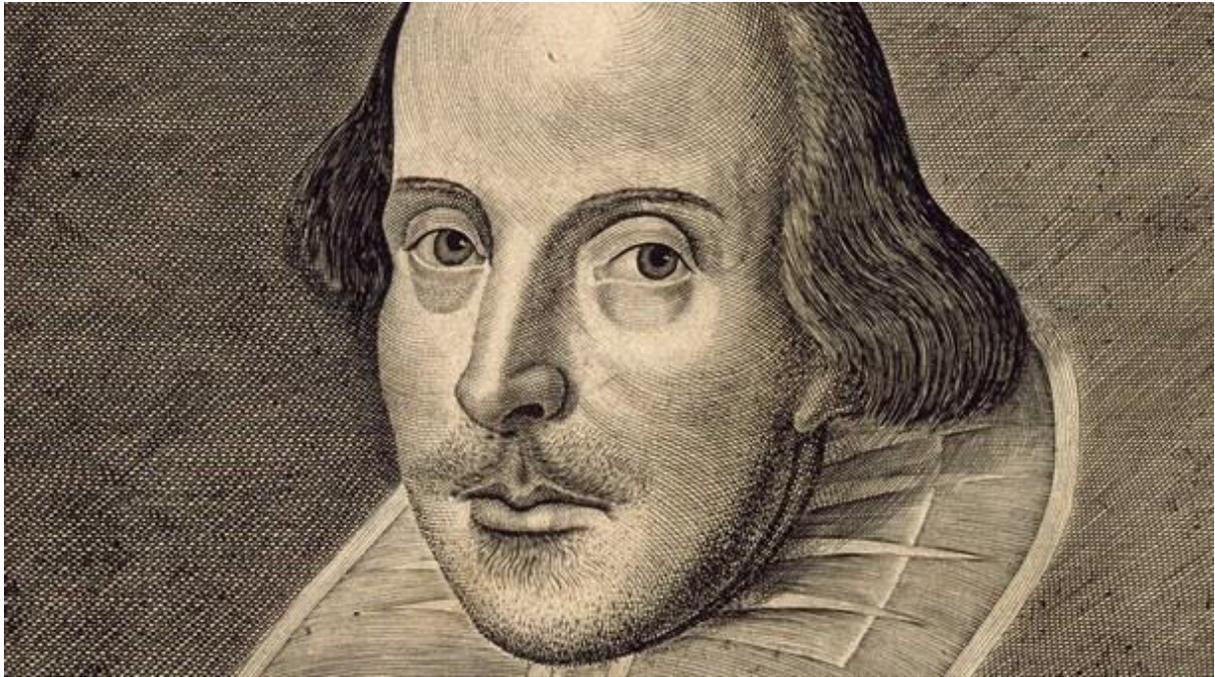


# William Shakespeare



**William Shakespeare** (bapt. 26 April 1564 – 23 April 1616) was an English playwright, poet, and actor, widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's greatest dramatist. He is often called England's national poet and the 'Bard of Avon' (or simply 'the Bard'). His numerous works, including collaborations, consist of some 39 plays, 154 sonnets, three long narrative poems, and a few other verses, some of uncertain authorship. His plays have been translated into every major living language and are performed more often than those of any other playwright. They also continue to be studied and reinterpreted to this day.

**William Shakespeare** was born and raised in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire.

At the age of 18, he married **Anne Hathaway**, with whom he had three children: Susanna and twins Hamnet and Judith.

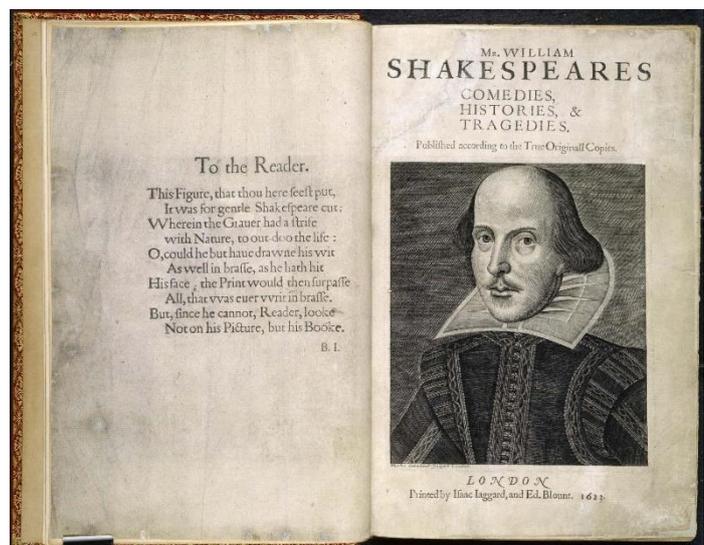
Sometime between 1585 and 1592, he began a successful career in London as an actor, writer, and part-owner of a playing company called the Lord Chamberlain's Men, later known as the King's Men.

At age 49 (around 1613), he appears to have retired to Stratford, where he died three years later. Few records of **Shakespeare's** private life survive; this has stimulated considerable speculation about such matters as his physical appearance, his sexuality, his religious beliefs, and whether the works attributed to him were written by others.



**Shakespeare** produced most of his known works between 1589 and 1613. His early plays were primarily comedies and histories and are regarded as some of the best work produced in these genres. He then wrote mainly tragedies until 1608, among them *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, all considered to be among the finest works in the English language. In the last phase of his life, he wrote tragicomedies (also known as romances) and collaborated with other playwrights.

Many of Shakespeare's plays were published in editions of varying quality and accuracy in his lifetime. However, in 1623, two fellow actors and friends of **Shakespeare's**, John Heminges and Henry Condell, published a more definitive text known as the First Folio, a posthumous collected edition of **Shakespeare's** dramatic works that included all but two of his plays. The volume was prefaced with a poem by Ben Jonson, in which Jonson presciently hailed **Shakespeare** in a now-famous quote as 'not of an age, but for all time'.



The first recorded works of **Shakespeare** are *Richard III* and the three parts of *Henry VI*, written in the early 1590s during a vogue for historical drama. Shakespeare's plays are difficult to date precisely, however, and studies of the texts suggest that *Titus Andronicus*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* may also belong to **Shakespeare's** earliest period. His first histories, which draw heavily on the 1587 edition of Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, dramatise the destructive results of weak or corrupt rule and have been interpreted as a justification for the origins of the Tudor dynasty. The early plays were influenced by the works of other Elizabethan dramatists, especially Thomas Kyd and Christopher Marlowe, by the traditions of medieval drama, and by the plays of Seneca. *The Comedy of Errors* was also based on classical models, but no source for *The Taming of the Shrew* has been found, though it is related to a separate play of the same name and may have derived from a folk story. Like *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, in which two friends appear to approve of rape, the *Shrew's* story of the taming of a woman's independent spirit by a man sometimes troubles modern critics, directors, and audiences.

**Shakespeare's** early classical and Italianate comedies, containing tight double plots and precise comic sequences, give way in the mid-1590s to the romantic atmosphere of his most acclaimed comedies. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a witty mixture of romance, fairy magic, and comic lowlife scenes. **Shakespeare's** next comedy, the equally romantic *Merchant of Venice*, contains a portrayal of the vengeful Jewish moneylender Shylock, which reflects Elizabethan views but may appear derogatory to modern audiences. The wit and wordplay of *Much Ado About Nothing*, the charming rural setting of *As You Like It*, and the lively merrymaking of *Twelfth Night* complete **Shakespeare's** sequence of great comedies. After the lyrical *Richard II*, written almost entirely in verse, **Shakespeare** introduced prose comedy into the histories of the late 1590s, *Henry IV, parts 1 and 2*, and *Henry V*. His characters become more complex and tender as he switches deftly between comic and serious scenes, prose and poetry, and achieves the narrative variety of his mature work. This period begins and ends with two tragedies: *Romeo and Juliet*, the famous romantic tragedy of sexually charged adolescence, love, and death; and *Julius Caesar* which introduced a new kind of drama. According to Shakespearean scholar James Shapiro, in *Julius*

*Caesar*, 'the various strands of politics, character, inwardness, contemporary events, even **Shakespeare's** own reflections on the act of writing, began to infuse each other'.

In the early 17th century, Shakespeare wrote the so-called 'problem plays' *Measure for Measure*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *All's Well That Ends Well* and a number of his best known tragedies. Many critics believe that **Shakespeare's** greatest tragedies represent the peak of his art. The titular hero of one of **Shakespeare's** greatest tragedies, *Hamlet*, has probably been discussed more than any other Shakespearean character, especially for his famous soliloquy which begins 'To be or not to be; that is the question'. Unlike the introverted Hamlet, whose fatal flaw is hesitation, the heroes of the tragedies that followed, Othello and King Lear, are undone by hasty errors of judgement. The plots of Shakespeare's tragedies often hinge on such fatal errors or flaws, which overturn order and destroy the hero and those he loves. In *Othello*, the villain Iago stokes Othello's sexual jealousy to the point where he murders the innocent wife who loves him. In *King Lear*, the old king commits the tragic error of giving up his powers, initiating the events which lead to the torture and blinding of the Earl of Gloucester and the murder of Lear's youngest daughter Cordelia. According to the

critic Frank Kermode, 'the play...offers neither its good characters nor its audience any relief from its cruelty'. In *Macbeth*, the shortest and most compressed of **Shakespeare's** tragedies, uncontrollable ambition incites Macbeth and his wife, Lady Macbeth, to murder the rightful king and usurp the throne until their own guilt destroys them in turn. In this play, **Shakespeare** adds a supernatural element to the tragic structure. His last major tragedies, *Antony & Cleopatra* & *Coriolanus*, contain some of **Shakespeare's** finest poetry and were considered his most successful tragedies by the poet and critic T. S. Eliot.

In his final period, **Shakespeare** turned to romance or tragicomedy and completed three more major plays: *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*, as well as the collaboration, *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*. Less bleak than the tragedies, these four plays are graver in tone than the comedies of the 1590s, but they end with reconciliation and the forgiveness of potentially tragic errors. Some commentators have seen this change in mood as evidence of a more serene view of life on **Shakespeare's** part, but it may merely reflect the theatrical fashion of the day. **Shakespeare** collaborated on two further surviving plays, *Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, probably with John Fletcher.