

CliffsNotes.com® About the Author for **HAMLET**

William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is considered to be the greatest writer in the history of English literature. His genius produced the world's most-often produced and published plays, including *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *King Lear*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and more than 32 others. Along with Shakespeare's plays, his 154 sonnets and several lyrical poems have been translated into over 80 different languages throughout the world. And yet, many people — even Bard scholars — know very little about Shakespeare's actual life.

Early Years

Public records show that he was born to a middle-class family in the village of Stratford-Upon-Avon, England, in April of 1564. Shakespeare's actual birth date is unknown, but records show that he was baptized at the Holy Trinity parish church in Stratford on April 26, 1564. Since children of the times were often baptized within a few days of birth, April 23 is generally accepted to be his birthday. (Coincidentally, April 23 is also the day he died in 1616.)

He was the first born son to John Shakespeare, a businessman and town Alderman, and Mary Arden, a local heiress. Because his father was an Alderman, young William would have received an excellent childhood education at a local grammar school. His lessons would have included English grammar, as well as Latin and Greek, including studies of classical authors such as Ovid, Plautus, Horace, Virgil, Cicero and Seneca. It is believed, however, that Shakespeare had to leave school at age 13 or 14, when his father fell on hard financial times and needed his son's help at home. There is no record of William ever attending university.

Marriage and Children

In 1582, at the age of 18, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, 8 years his senior and 3 months pregnant with their first child. They had three children, Susanna, born in 1583, and twins Hamnet and Judith, who were born in 1585. Sadly, Hamnet died at the tender age of 11.

Shakespeare's first daughter, Susanna, married Dr. John Hall in June 1607. Hall was a well-respected and brilliant Stratford physician. They had one child, Elizabeth, born in 1608, who lived to be 62 years old. Susanna lived a long and prosperous life as well, dying in 1649 at the age of 66.

Shakespeare's second daughter, Judith, married in February of 1616 at age 31 (late in life for the times). She married Thomas Quiney, a ne'er do well local vintner. Unfortunately, Judith's life with Quiney was largely marked by scandal and unhappiness. The couple had three children, all of whom died relatively early in life. Their firstborn, Shakespeare, died in infancy in 1617. Two other sons, Richard and Thomas, survived to adulthood, but died at the young ages of 21 and 19 respectively. Judith died in 1662, having lived to the age of 77 (an extraordinarily long life, in Shakespeare's day and age).

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Lost Years

Soon after his twins were born in 1585, Shakespeare left Stratford, disappearing for the next 7 years from all public records, until he turned up in London some time in 1592. It is unknown what Shakespeare's life was like during these "lost years," but by 1592, he had already become a very successful actor, producer, and playwright in London. It is believed that he wrote his first plays, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Titus Andronicus*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Henry VI, 1,2,3*, and *Richard III*, sometime between 1587 and 1592.

Shakespeare was so famous by 1592, in fact, that he inspired envy in a leading London playwright of the times, Robert Greene, who wrote a scathing critical attack of Shakespeare, calling him ". . . an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tiger's heart wrapped in a player's hide, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and being an absolute Johannes fac totum, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country."

London

By the end of 1592, Shakespeare had built a successful theatre career in London, working with several different acting companies, most especially the Queen's Company. But in January of 1593, all the theatres in London were closed down because of the plague. They would not open again until the spring of 1594. This meant hard times for many acting companies of the day, who were reduced to a life of touring, which was much harder and earned them a lot less pay.

It was during this time that Shakespeare, through his social connections due to his burgeoning fame, became acquainted with Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, who became his sponsor, and to whom Shakespeare dedicated his long narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis*, (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594). Shakespeare's relationship with Lord Wriothesley had a profound effect on his life and work, and it is believed that Shakespeare's *Sonnets numbers 18-126* were written with Lord Wriothesley as inspiration.

Prosperity and Fame

By the time the theatres in London reopened in 1594, Shakespeare had gained much notoriety for his poetry as well as for his playwriting and acting. From 1594 onward, his plays were produced almost exclusively by the Lord Chamberlain's Men, one of the most well known and respected companies in London, and in which Shakespeare was a part owner. After Queen Elizabeth I died in 1603, the company's name was changed to the King's Men, after having been awarded a royal patent by the newly crowned King James I. From 1594 to 1596, Shakespeare wrote 4 popular plays, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard II*, and *The Merchant of Venice*.

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By 1597 Shakespeare was successful and wealthy enough to purchase the finest estate in Stratford-Upon-Avon at the time, called "New Place," as well as making other lucrative investments.

Artistic Maturity

The period from 1597-1608 was one of incredible productivity and artistic maturity for Shakespeare. During 1597-1599 he wrote 6 plays, *Henry IV, 1, 2*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Henry V*, and *Julius Caesar*. It was also during this time that he became an investor and part owner of the Globe Theatre, newly built on the banks of the Thames River in London. Shakespeare also became part owner of the Blackfriars theatre in London, which was a smaller enclosed venue for use during the winter months. From 1600-1608 he wrote the bulk of his great tragedies, including some of his most critically acclaimed works, *Twelfth Night*, *Hamlet*, *Troilus & Cressida*, *Alls Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, *Timon of Athens*.

The Sonnets and Final Plays

Shakespeare wrote The Sonnets over a period of many years, probably in the 1590's, but they were not published until 1609, in a complete edition entitled, *SHAKE-SPEARES SONNETS*. It is not entirely clear if the publication of *The Sonnets* was authorized by Shakespeare, or if the printer, Thomas Thorpe, took it upon himself to print them without the author's approval. Either way, it is highly unlikely that Shakespeare profited much from the publication. During the period from 1609-1611, Shakespeare remained a vital member of the King's Men playing company, and also wrote 4 plays, *Pericles Prince of Tyre*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*, which is believed to be the last full play that Shakespeare wrote, outside of several collaborations he worked on in his later years with fellow playwright, John Fletcher.

Return to Stratford

After more than 20 successful years spent working in the London theatre world, William Shakespeare returned to his family estate in Stratford-Upon-Avon in 1612. People in Shakespeare's day rarely "retired," and it's likely his final years were spent working in some capacity with his theatre company, although he rarely returned to London after 1612. On March 26, 1616, probably in failing health, Shakespeare revised his will. Less than a month later, on April 23, 1616, he died. The cause of death is unknown, however, in a pre-antibiotics age of plague, smallpox, typhus, and dysentery, living to a ripe old age of 52 was quite an achievement, given that the typical lifespan for men of the time was about 30 years.

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Legacy

The full texts of Shakespeare's plays were never published during his lifetime. In 1623, a collection of 36 of his plays was compiled by his colleagues as a memorial to the great author, and published under the title, *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories. & Tragedies*. The book is now famously known as the *First Folio*, and provides the only existing original text for most of Shakespeare's plays.

The Bard of Avon, as Shakespeare came to be affectionately known, ("Bard" means poet or minstrel in ancient Celtic), produced a body of work which still resonates powerfully today, and will continue to be engaging and relevant as long as people strive to understand the human condition. Surely, Shakespeare was talking about his own legacy when he wrote these final lines from *Sonnet 18*:

*When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*