

An Introduction

William Shakespeare was a renowned English poet, playwright, and actor born in 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon. His birthday is most commonly celebrated on 23 April (see When was Shakespeare born), which is also believed to be the date he died in 1616.

Shakespeare was a prolific writer during the Elizabethan and Jacobean ages of British theatre (sometimes called the English Renaissance or the Early Modern Period). Shakespeare's plays are perhaps his most enduring legacy, but they are not all he wrote. Shakespeare's poems also remain popular to this day.

Shakespeare's Work

Shakespeare's works include 38 plays, 2 narrative poems, 154 sonnets, and a variety of other poems. No original manuscripts of Shakespeare's plays are known to exist today. It is actually thanks to a group of actors from Shakespeare's company that we have about half of the plays at all. They collected them for publication after Shakespeare died, preserving the plays. These writings were brought together in what is known as the First Folio ('Folio' refers to the size of the paper used). It contained 36 of his plays, but none of his poetry.

Shakespeare's legacy is as rich and diverse as his work; his plays have spawned countless adaptations across multiple genres and cultures. His plays have had an enduring presence on stage and film. His writings have been compiled in various iterations of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, which include all of his plays, sonnets, and other poems. William Shakespeare continues to be one of the most important literary figures of the English language.

Shakespeare's Life

Records survive relating to William Shakespeare's family. Through these, we can gain an understanding of the context of Shakespeare's early life and the lives of his family members. John Shakespeare married Mary Arden, and together they had eight children. John and Mary lost two daughters as infants, so William became their eldest child. John Shakespeare worked as a glove-maker, but he also became an important figure in the town of Stratford by fulfilling civic positions. His elevated status meant that he was even more likely to have sent his children, including Shakespeare, to the local grammar school. John was awarded a coat of arms, now displayed on the monument above the Shakespeare grave in Holy Trinity Church. Versions of the Shakespeare coat of arms can also be seen on Shakespeare's Birthplace, outside of the Shakespeare Centre, and above the entrance to Shakespeare's New Place.

William Shakespeare would have lived with his family in their house on Henley Street until he turned eighteen. When he was eighteen, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, who was twenty-six. It was a rushed marriage because Anne was already pregnant at the time of the ceremony. Together they had three children. Their first daughter, Susanna, was born six months after the wedding and was later followed by twins Hamnet and Judith. Hamnet died when he was just 11 years old.

- *For an overview of William Shakespeare's life, see Shakespeare's Life: A Timeline*

Shakespeare in London

Shakespeare's career jump-started in London. When did he go there? We do know Shakespeare's twins were baptised in 1585, and Shakespeare established his reputation in London by 1592. But the intervening years are considered a mystery. Scholars generally refer to these years as 'The Lost Years'.

During his time in London, Shakespeare became a founding member of The Lord Chamberlain's Men, a company of actors. The company would later become The King's Men under the patronage of King James I (from 1603). During his time in the company Shakespeare wrote many of his most famous tragedies, such as *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, as well as great romances, like *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*.

New Place

In 1597, William Shakespeare bought a home called New Place in Stratford-upon-Avon. Recent archaeological evidence discovered on the site of Shakespeare's New Place shows that Shakespeare was only ever an intermittent lodger in London. This suggests he divided his time between Stratford and London (a two or three-day commute). In his later years, he may have spent more time in Stratford-upon-Avon than scholars previously thought.