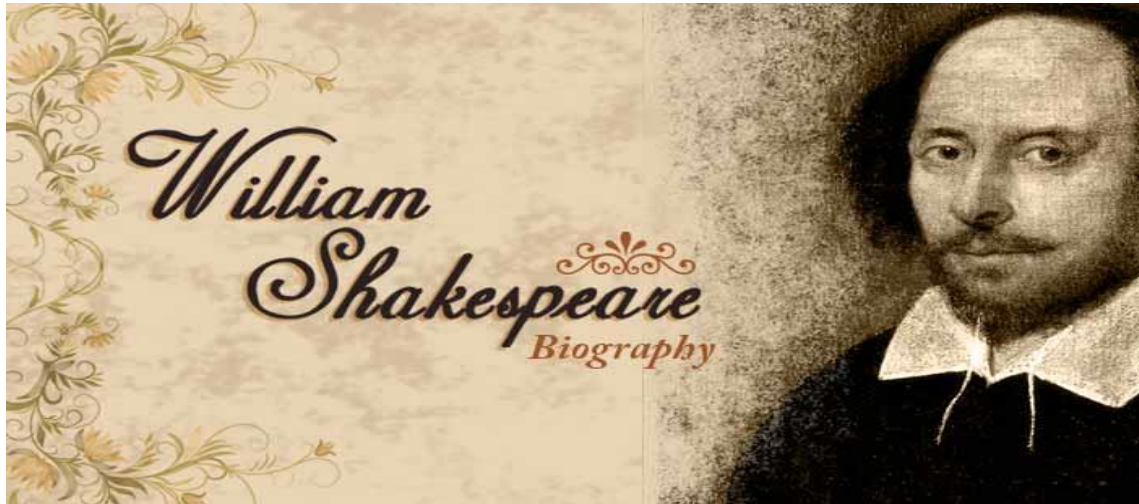


# **BRITISH CULTURE & SOCIETY I**

## **WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE BIOGRAPHY**



Known throughout the world, the works of William Shakespeare have been performed in countless hamlets, villages, cities and metropolises for more than 400 years. And yet, the personal history of William Shakespeare is somewhat a mystery. There are two primary sources that provide historians with a basic outline of his life. One source is his work—the plays, poems and sonnets—and the other is official documentation such as church and court records. However, these only provide brief sketches of specific events in his life and provide little on the person who experienced those events. All that can be deduced is that over the course of 20 years, Shakespeare wrote plays that capture the complete range of human emotion and conflict.

### **Early Life**

Though no birth records exist, church records indicate that a William Shakespeare was baptized at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon on April 26, 1564. From this, it is believed he was born on or near April 23, 1564, and this is the date scholars acknowledge as William Shakespeare's birthday.

Located 103 miles west of London, during Shakespeare's time Stratford-upon-Avon was a market town bisected with a country road and the River Avon. William was the third child of John Shakespeare, a leather merchant, and Mary

Arden, a local landed heiress. Before William's birth, his father became a successful merchant and held official positions as alderman and bailiff, an office resembling a mayor. However, records indicate John's fortunes declined sometime in the late 1570s.

Scant records exist of William's childhood, and virtually none regarding his education. Scholars have surmised that he most likely attended the King's New School, in Stratford, which taught reading, writing and the classics. Being a public official's child, William would have undoubtedly qualified for free tuition. But this uncertainty regarding his education has led some to raise questions about the authorship of his work and even about whether or not William Shakespeare ever existed.

### **Married Life**

William Shakespeare married [Anne Hathaway](#) on November 28, 1582, in Worcester, in Canterbury Province. Hathaway was from Shottery, a small village a mile west of Stratford. William was 18 and Anne was 26, and, as it turns out, pregnant. Their first child, a daughter they named Susanna, was born on May 26, 1583. Two years later, on February 2, 1585, twins Hamnet and Judith were born. Hamnet later died of unknown causes at age 11. After the birth of the twins, there are seven years of William Shakespeare's life where no records exist. It is generally believed he arrived in London in the mid- to late 1580s and may have found work as a horse attendant at some of London's finer theaters.

### **Theatrical Beginnings**

By 1592, there is evidence William Shakespeare earned a living as an actor and a playwright in London and possibly had several plays produced. By the early 1590s, documents show William Shakespeare was a managing partner in the Lord Chamberlain's Men, an acting company in London. After the crowning of King James I, in 1603, the company changed its name to the King's Men. From all accounts, the King's Men company was very popular, and records show that Shakespeare had works published and sold as popular literature. The theater culture in 16th century England was not highly admired by people of high rank. However, many of the nobility were good patrons of the performing arts and friends of the actors.

By 1597, 15 of the 37 plays written by William Shakespeare were published. Civil records show that at this time he purchased the second largest house in Stratford, called New House, for his family. It was a four-day ride by horse from Stratford to London, so it is believed that Shakespeare spent most of his time in the city writing and acting and came home once a year during the 40-day Lenten period, when the theaters were closed. By 1599, William Shakespeare and his business partners built their own theater on the south bank of the Thames River, which they called the Globe. In 1605, Shakespeare purchased leases of real estate near Stratford for 440 pounds, which doubled in value and earned him 60 pounds a year. This made him an entrepreneur as well as an artist, and scholars believe these investments gave him the time to write his plays uninterrupted.

### **Early Works: Histories and Comedies**

With the exception of *Romeo and Juliet*, William Shakespeare's first plays were mostly histories written in the early 1590s. *Richard II*, *Henry VI* (parts 1, 2 and 3) and *Henry V* dramatize the destructive results of weak or corrupt rulers, and have been interpreted by drama historians as Shakespeare's way of justifying the origins of the Tudor Dynasty.

Shakespeare also wrote several comedies during his early period: the witty romance *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the romantic *Merchant of Venice*, the wit and wordplay of *Much Ado About Nothing*, the charming *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*. Other plays, possibly written before 1600, include *Titus Andronicus*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

### **Later Works: Tragedies and Tragicomedies**

It was in William Shakespeare's later period, after 1600, that he wrote the tragedies *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*. In these, Shakespeare's characters present vivid impressions of human temperament that are timeless and universal. Possibly the best known of these plays is *Hamlet*, which explores betrayal, retribution, incest and moral failure. These moral failures often drive the twists and turns of Shakespeare's plots, destroying the hero and those he loves. In William Shakespeare's final period, he wrote several tragicomedies.

Among these are *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. Though graver in tone than the comedies, they are not the dark tragedies of *King Lear* or *Macbeth* because they end with reconciliation and forgiveness.

### **Controversy and Literary Legacy**

About 150 years after his death, questions arose about the authorship of William Shakespeare's plays. Much of this stemmed from the sketchy details of Shakespeare's life and the dearth of contemporary primary sources. Official records from the Holy Trinity Church and the Stratford government record the existence of a William Shakespeare, but none of these attest to him being an actor or playwright. Skeptics also questioned how anyone of such modest education could write with the intellectual perceptiveness and poetic power that is displayed in Shakespeare's works.

However, the vast majority of Shakespearean scholars contend that William Shakespeare wrote all his own plays. They point out that other playwrights of the time also had sketchy histories and came from modest backgrounds. They contend that Stratford's New Grammar School curriculum of Latin and the classics could have provided a good foundation for literary writers. Supporters of Shakespeare's authorship argue that the lack of evidence about Shakespeare's life doesn't mean his life didn't exist. They point to evidence that displays his name on the title pages of published poems and plays. Examples exist of authors and critics of the time acknowledging William Shakespeare as author of plays such as *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Comedy of Errors* and *King John*.

What seems to be true is that William Shakespeare was a respected man of the dramatic arts who wrote plays and acted in some in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. But his reputation as a dramatic genius wasn't recognized until the 19th century. Beginning with the Romantic period of the early 1800s and continuing through the Victorian period, acclaim and reverence for William Shakespeare and his work reached its height. In the 20th century, new movements in scholarship and performance have rediscovered and adopted his works. Today, his plays are highly popular and constantly studied and reinterpreted in performances with diverse cultural and political contexts. The genius of Shakespeare's characters and plots are that they present real human

beings in a wide range of emotions and conflicts that transcend their origins in Elizabethan England.

### Vocabulary Check

Write the English meaning for the following words taken from the text:

- a) deduced \_\_\_\_\_
- b) bisected \_\_\_\_\_
- c) scant \_\_\_\_\_
- d) admired \_\_\_\_\_
- e) entrepreneur \_\_\_\_\_
- f) corrupt \_\_\_\_\_
- g) witty \_\_\_\_\_
- h) vivid \_\_\_\_\_
- i) reconciliation \_\_\_\_\_
- j) modest \_\_\_\_\_
- k) contend \_\_\_\_\_
- l) acclaim \_\_\_\_\_
- m) transcend \_\_\_\_\_
- n) authorship \_\_\_\_\_

### Comprehension Questions

Write the answer to the following questions in your own words with a sentence:

- 1) What are the 2 main sources of information about William Shakespeare?

\_\_\_\_\_

- 2) Why was Shakespeare's education free?

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- 3) Who were 'The King's Men'?

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4) In 16<sup>th</sup> century England, what was the relationship between the upper classes and the theatre?

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5) How do we know (2 reasons) William Shakespeare had become a successful playwright?

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6) What 2 things did Shakespeare do to give him enough money to become a full-time playwright?

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7) What did William Shakespeare's early history plays try to do?

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8) What are the 2 main reasons why some people question William Shakespeare's authorship of many of his plays?

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9) When was William Shakespeare recognized as a genius??

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10) What was the real genius of his work?

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