

Shakespeareat

| | | | | | | | |
|--|---|--|--|---|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE | KING LEAR | HAMLET | MACBETH | OTHELLO | ROMEO AND JULIET | JULIUS CAESAR | CORIOLANUS |
| CYMBELINE | TITUS ANDRONICUS | TIMON OF ATHENS | TROILUS AND CRESSIDA | ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA | KING JOHN | | |
| HENRY IV, PART 1 | HENRY IV, PART 2 | HENRY V | HENRY VI, PART 1 | HENRY VI, PART 2 | HENRY VI, PART 3 | RICHARD III | |
| HENRY VIII | ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL | AS YOU LIKE IT | THE COMEDY OF ERRORS | LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST | | | |
| MEASURE FOR MEASURE | THE MERCHANT OF VENICE | THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR | A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM | | | | |
| MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING | PERICLES, PRINCE OF TYRE | THE TEMPEST | TWELFTH NIGHT | THE TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA | | | |
| THE TWO NOBLE KINSMEN | THE WINTER'S TALE | LOVE'S LABOUR'S WON | THE HISTORY OF CARDENIO | A LOVER'S COMPLAINT | | | |
| THE RAPE OF LUCRECE | THE PASSIONATE PILGRIM | VENUS AND ADONIS | THE PHOENIX AND THE TURTLE | SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS | | | |

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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COMEDIES

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

William Shakespeare

[ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL](#)[AS YOU LIKE IT](#)[LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST](#)[MEASURE FOR MEASURE](#)[MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING](#)[PERICLES, PRINCE OF TYRE](#)[THE COMEDY OF ERRORS](#)[THE MERCHANT OF VENICE](#)[THE MERCHANT OF VENICE](#)[THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR](#)[THE TAMING OF THE SHREW](#)[THE TEMPEST](#)[THE TWO GENTLEMEN OF
VERONA](#)[THE TWO NOBLE KINSMEN](#)[THE WINTER'S TALE](#)[TWELFTH NIGHT](#)

HISTORIES

[HENRY IV, PART 1](#)[HENRY IV, PART 2](#)[HENRY V](#)[HENRY VI, PART 1](#)[HENRY VI, PART 2](#)[HENRY VI, PART 3](#)[HENRY VIII](#)[KING JOHN](#)[RICHARD II](#) [Subscribe to posts](#)

William Shakespeare

posted Jul 30, 2013, 9:56 AM by alaa hagag [**updated Aug 21, 2013, 12:03 PM**]

William Shakespeare

(26 April 1564 ([baptised](#)) – 23 April 1616)^[nb 1] was an English [poet](#) and [playwright](#), widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's pre-eminent dramatist.^[1] He is often called England's [national poet](#) and the "Bard of Avon".^{[2][nb 2]} His extant works, including some [collaborations](#), consist of about 38 [plays](#),^[nb 3] 154 [sonnets](#), two long [narrative poems](#), two epitaphs on a man named John Combe, one epitaph on Elias James, and several other poems. His plays have been translated into every major living language and are performed more often than those of any other playwright.^[3]

Shakespeare was born and brought up in [Stratford-upon-Avon](#). At the age of 18, he married [Anne Hathaway](#), with whom he had three children: [Susanna](#), and twins [Hamnet](#) and [Judith](#). 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](#). He appears to have retired to Stratford around 1613 at age 49, where he died three years later. Few records of Shakespeare's private life survive, and there has been considerable speculation about such matters as [his physical appearance](#), [sexuality](#), [religious beliefs](#), and whether the works attributed to him were [written by others](#).^[4]

Shakespeare produced most of his known work between 1589 and 1613.^{[5][nb 4]} His early plays were mainly [comedies](#) and [histories](#), genres he raised to the peak of sophistication and artistry by the end of the 16th century. He then wrote mainly [tragedies](#) until about 1608, including

[RICHARD III](#)

HISTORIES

LOST PLAYS[LOVE'S LABOUR'S WON](#)[LOVE'S LABOUR'S WON](#)[THE HISTORY OF CARDENIO](#)

POEMS[A LOVER'S COMPLAINT](#)[SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS](#)[THE PASSIONATE PILGRIM](#)[THE PHOENIX AND THE TURTLE](#)[THE RAPE OF LUCRECE](#)[VENUS AND ADONIS](#)[VENUS AND ADONIS](#)

TRAGEDIES[ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA](#)[CORIOLANUS](#)[CYMBELINE](#)[HAMLET](#)[JULIUS CAESAR](#)[KING LEAR](#)[MACBETH](#)[OTHELLO](#)[ROMEO AND JULIET](#)[SITEMAP.XML](#)[TIMON OF ATHENS](#)[TITUS ANDRONICUS](#)

Hamlet, *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*, considered some of the finest works in the English language. In his last phase, he wrote [tragicomedies](#), also known as romances, and collaborated with other playwrights.

Many of his plays were published in editions of varying quality and accuracy during his lifetime. In 1623, [John Heminges](#) and [Henry Condell](#), two friends and fellow actors of Shakespeare, published the [First Folio](#), a collected edition of his dramatic works that included all but two of the plays now recognised as Shakespeare's. It was prefaced with a poem by [Ben Jonson](#), in which Shakespeare is hailed, presciently, as "not of an age, but for all time."^[6]

Shakespeare was a respected poet and playwright in his own day, but his reputation did not rise to its present heights until the 19th century. The [Romantics](#), in particular, acclaimed Shakespeare's genius, and the [Victorians](#) worshipped Shakespeare with a reverence that [George Bernard Shaw](#) called "[bardolatry](#)".^[7] In the 20th century, his work was repeatedly adopted and rediscovered by new movements in scholarship and performance. His plays remain highly popular today and are constantly studied, performed, and reinterpreted in diverse cultural and political contexts throughout the world.

Life

Early life

William Shakespeare was the son of [John Shakespeare](#), an [alderman](#) and a successful glover originally from [Snitterfield](#), and [Mary Arden](#), the daughter of an affluent landowning farmer.^[8] He was born in Stratfor

d-upon-Avon and baptised there on 26 April 1564. His actual date of birth remains unknown, but is traditionally observed on 23 April, [St George's Day](#).^[9] This date, which can be traced back to an 18th-century scholar's mistake, has proved appealing to biographers, since Shakespeare died 23 April 1616.^[10] He was the third child of eight and the eldest surviving son.^[11]

Although no attendance records for the period survive, most biographers agree that Shakespeare was probably educated at the [King's New School](#) in Stratford,^[12] a free school chartered in 1553,^[13] about a quarter-mile from his home. [Grammar schools](#) varied in quality during the Elizabethan era, but grammar school curricula were largely similar, the basic [Latin](#)

text was standardised by royal decree,^[14] and the school would have provided an intensive education in grammar based upon Latin [classical](#) authors.^[15]

John Shakespeare's house, believed to be [Shakespeare's birthplace](#), in [Stratford-upon-Avon](#).

At the age of 18, Shakespeare married the 26-year-old [Anne Hathaway](#). The [consistory court](#) of the [Diocese of Worcester](#) issued a marriage licence on 27 November 1582. The next day two of Hathaway's neighbours posted bonds guaranteeing that no lawful claims impeded the marriage.^[16] The ceremony may have been arranged in some haste, since the Worcester [chancellor](#) allowed the [marriage banns](#) to be read once instead of the usual three times,^[17] and six months after the marriage Anne gave birth to a daughter, [Susanna](#), baptised 26 May 1583.^[18] Twins, son [Hamnet](#) and daughter [Judith](#), followed almost two years later and were baptised 2 February 1585.^[19] Hamnet died of unknown causes at the age of 11 and was buried 11 August 1596.^[20]

After the birth of the twins, Shakespeare left few historical traces until he is mentioned as part of the London theatre scene in 1592. The exception is the appearance of his name in the 'complaints bill' of a law case before the Queen's Bench court at Westminster dated Michaelmas Term 1588 and 9 October 1589.^[21] Scholars refer to the years between 1585 and 1592 as Shakespeare's "lost years".^[22] Biographers attempting to account for this period have reported many [apocryphal](#) stories. [Nicholas Rowe](#), Shakespeare's first biographer, recounted a Stratford legend that Shakespeare fled the town for London to escape prosecution for deer [poaching](#) in the estate of local squire [Thomas Lucy](#). Shakespeare is also supposed to have taken his revenge on Lucy by writing a scurrilous ballad about him.^[23] Another 18th-century story has Shakespeare starting his theatrical career minding the horses of theatre patrons in London.^[24] [John Aubrey](#) reported that Shakespeare had been a country schoolmaster.^[25] Some 20th-century scholars have suggested that Shakespeare may have been employed as a schoolmaster by Alexander Hoghton of [Lancashire](#), a Catholic landowner who named a certain "William Shakeshafte" in his will.^[26] Little evidence substantiates such stories other than [hearsay](#) collected after his death, and Shakeshafte was a common name in the Lancashire area.^[27]

It is not known exactly when Shakespeare began writing, but contemporary allusions and records of performances show that several of his plays were on the London stage by 1592.^[29] By then, he was sufficiently well known in London to be attacked in print by the playwright

Robert Greene in his *Groats-Worth of Wit*:

...there is 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 factotum*, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country.^[30]

Scholars differ on the exact meaning of these words,^[31] but most agree that Greene is accusing Shakespeare of reaching above his rank in trying to match university-educated writers such as Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Nashe and Greene himself (the "university wits").^[32] The italicised phrase parodying the line "Oh, tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide" from Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part 3*, along with the pun "Shake-scene", identifies Shakespeare as Greene's target. Here *Johannes Factotum*—"Jack of all trades"—means a second-rate tinkerer with the work of others, rather than the more common "universal genius".^{[31][33]}

Greene's attack is the earliest surviving mention of Shakespeare's career in the theatre. Biographers suggest that his career may have begun any time from the mid-1580s to just before Greene's remarks.^[34] From 1594, Shakespeare's plays were performed by only the Lord Chamberlain's Men, a company owned by a group of players, including Shakespeare, that soon became the leading playing company in London.^[35] After the death of Queen Elizabeth in 1603, the company was awarded a royal patent by the new king, James I, and changed its name to the King's Men.^[36]

In 1599, a partnership of company members built their own theatre on the south bank of the River Thames, which they called the Globe. In 1608, the partnership also took over the Blackfriars indoor theatre. Records of Shakespeare's property purchases and investments indicate that the company made him a wealthy man.^[37] In 1597, he bought the second-largest house in Stratford, New Place, and in 1605, he invested in a share of the parish tithes in Stratford.^[38]

Some of Shakespeare's plays were published in quarto editions from 1594. By 1598, his name had become a selling point and began to appear on the title pages.^[39] Shakespeare continued to act in his own and other plays after his success as a playwright. The 1616 edition of Ben Jonson's *Works* names him on the cast lists for *Every Man in His Humour* (1598) and *Sejanus His Fall* (1603).^[40] The absence of his name from the 1605 cast list for Jonson's *Volpone* is taken by some scholars as a sign that his acting career was nearing its end.^[41] The First Folio of 1623,

however, lists Shakespeare as one of "the Principal Actors in all these Plays", some of which were first staged after *Volpone*, although we cannot know for certain which roles he played.^[42] In 1610, [John Davies of Hereford](#) wrote that "good Will" played "kingly" roles.^[43] In 1709, Rowe passed down a tradition that Shakespeare played the ghost of Hamlet's father.^[44] Later traditions maintain that he also played Adam in *As You Like It* and the Chorus in *Henry V*,^[45] though scholars doubt the sources of the information.^[46]

Shakespeare divided his time between London and Stratford during his career. In 1596, the year before he bought New Place as his family home in Stratford, Shakespeare was living in the parish of St. Helen's, [Bishopsgate](#), north of the River Thames.^[47] He moved across the river to [Southwark](#) by 1599, the year his company constructed the Globe Theatre there.^[48] By 1604, he had moved north of the river again, to an area north of [St Paul's Cathedral](#) with many fine houses. There he rented rooms from a French [Huguenot](#) named Christopher Mountjoy, a maker of ladies' wigs and other headgear.^[49]

Later years and death

Rowe was the first biographer to pass down the tradition that Shakespeare retired to Stratford some years before his death.^[50] It is perhaps relevant that the London public playhouses were repeatedly closed for months at a time during the extended outbreaks of the Plague (a total of over 60 months closure between May 1603 and February 1610),^[51] which meant there was often no acting work. Retirement from all work was uncommon at that time,^[52] and Shakespeare continued to visit London.^[50] In 1612, Shakespeare was called as a witness in *Bellott v. Mountjoy*, a court case concerning the marriage settlement of Mountjoy's daughter, Mary.^[53] In March 1613 he bought a [gatehouse](#) in the former [Blackfriars priory](#),^[54] and from November 1614 he was in London for several weeks with his son-in-law, [John Hall](#).^[55]

[Shakespeare's funerary monument](#) in Stratford-upon-Avon.

After 1606–1607, Shakespeare wrote fewer plays, and none are attributed to him after 1613.^[56] His last three plays were collaborations, probably with [John Fletcher](#),^[57] who succeeded him as the house playwright for the King's Men.^[58]

Shakespeare died on 23 April 1616^[59] and was survived by his wife and two daughters. Susanna had married a physician, John Hall, in 1607,^[60] and Judith had married [Thomas Quiney](#), a [vintner](#), two months before Shakespeare's death.^[61]

In his will, Shakespeare left the bulk of his large estate to his elder daughter Susanna.^[62] The terms instructed that she pass it down intact to "the first son of her body".^[63] The Quineys had three children, all of whom died without marrying.^[64] The Halls had one child, Elizabeth, who married twice but died without children in 1670, ending Shakespeare's direct line.^[65] Shakespeare's will scarcely mentions his wife, Anne, who was probably entitled to one third of his estate automatically.^[66] He did make a point, however, of leaving her "my second best bed", a bequest that has led to much speculation.^[67] Some scholars see the bequest as an insult to Anne, whereas others believe that the second-best bed would have been the matrimonial bed and therefore rich in significance.^[68]

Shakespeare was buried in the [chancel](#) of the [Holy Trinity Church](#) two days after his death.^[69] The epitaph carved into the stone slab covering his grave includes a [curse](#) against moving his bones, which was carefully avoided during restoration of the church in 2008:^[70]

Shakespeare's grave

*Good frend for Iesvs sake forbear,
To digg the dvst enclosed heare.
Bleste be ye man yt spares thes stones,
And cvrst be he yt moves my bones.*^[71]

(Modern spelling: *Good friend, for Jesus' sake forbear, | To dig the dust enclosed here. | Blessed be the man that spares these stones, | And cursed be he that moves my bones.*)

Sometime before 1623, a [funerary monument](#) was erected in his memory on the north wall, with a half-effigy of him in the act of writing. Its plaque compares him to [Nestor](#), [Socrates](#), and [Virgil](#).^[72] In 1623, in conjunction with the publication of the [First Folio](#), the [Droeshout engraving](#) was published.^[73]

Shakespeare has been commemorated in many [statues and memorials](#) around the world, including funeral monuments in [Southwark Cathedral](#) and [Poets' Corner](#) in [Westminster Abbey](#).

Plays

Main articles: [William Shakespeare's plays](#) and [William Shakespeare's collaborations](#)

Most playwrights of the period typically collaborated with others at some point, and critics agree that Shakespeare did the same, mostly early and late in his career.^[74] Some attributions, such as *Titus Andronicus* and the early history plays, remain controversial, while *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and the lost *Cardenio* have well-attested contemporary documentation. Textual evidence also supports the view that several of the plays were revised by other writers after their original composition.

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, however,^[75] 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.^[76] His first *histories*, which draw heavily on the 1587 edition of *Raphael Holinshed's* *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*,^[77] dramatise the destructive results of weak or corrupt rule and have been interpreted as a justification for the origins of the *Tudor dynasty*.^[78] 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*.^[79] 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.^[80] Like *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, in which two friends appear to approve of rape,^[81] the *Shrew's* story of the taming of a woman's independent spirit by a man sometimes troubles modern critics and directors.^[82]

Oberon, Titania and Puck with Fairies Dancing. By *William Blake*, c. 1786. [Tate Britain](#).

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 greatest comedies.^[83] *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a witty mixture of romance, fairy magic, and comic lowlife scenes.^[84] 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.^[85] The wit and wordplay of *Much Ado About Nothing*,^[86] the charming rural setting of *As You Like It*, and the lively merrymaking of *Twelfth Night* complete Shakespeare's sequence of great comedies.^[87] After the lyrical *Richard*

//, 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.^[88] This period begins and ends with two tragedies: *Romeo and Juliet*, the famous romantic tragedy of sexually charged adolescence, love, and death;^[89] and *Julius Caesar*—based on Sir Thomas North's 1579 translation of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*—which introduced a new kind of drama.^[90] 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".^[91]

Hamlet, Horatio, Marcellus, and the Ghost of Hamlet's Father. Henry Fuseli, 1780–5. Kunsthaus Zürich.

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.^[92] Many critics believe that Shakespeare's greatest tragedies represent the peak of his art. The titular hero of one of Shakespeare's most famous 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".^[93] 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.^[94] 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.^[95] In *Othello*, the villain Iago stokes Othello's sexual jealousy to the point where he murders the innocent wife who loves him.^[96] 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".^[97] In *Macbeth*, the shortest and most compressed of Shakespeare's tragedies,^[98] 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.^[99] In this play, Shakespeare adds a supernatural element to the tragic structure. His last major tragedies, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*, contain some of Shakespeare's finest poetry and were considered his most successful tragedies by the poet and critic T. S. Eliot.^[100]

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.^[101] 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.^[102] Shakespeare collaborated on two further surviving plays, *Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, probably with John Fletcher.^[103]

Performances

Main article: [Shakespeare in performance](#)

It is not clear for which companies Shakespeare wrote his early plays. The title page of the 1594 edition of *Titus Andronicus* reveals that the play had been acted by three different troupes.^[104] After the [plagues](#) of 1592–3, Shakespeare's plays were performed by his own company at [The Theatre](#) and the [Curtain](#) in [Shoreditch](#), north of the Thames.^[105] Londoners flocked there to see the first part of *Henry IV*, [Leonard Digges](#) recording, "Let but Falstaff come, Hal, Poins, the rest...and you scarce shall have a room".^[106] When the company found themselves in dispute with their landlord, they pulled The Theatre down and used the timbers to construct the [Globe Theatre](#), the first playhouse built by actors for actors, on the south bank of the Thames at [Southwark](#).^[107] The Globe opened in autumn 1599, with *Julius Caesar* one of the first plays staged. Most of Shakespeare's greatest post-1599 plays were written for the Globe, including *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *King Lear*.^[108]

The reconstructed [Globe Theatre](#), London.

After the Lord Chamberlain's Men were renamed the [King's Men](#) in 1603, they entered a special relationship with the new [King James](#). Although the performance records are patchy, the King's Men performed seven of Shakespeare's plays at court between 1 November 1604 and 31 October 1605, including two performances of *The Merchant of Venice*.^[109] After 1608, they performed at the indoor [Blackfriars Theatre](#) during the winter and the Globe during the summer.^[110] The indoor setting, combined with the [Jacobean](#) fashion for lavishly staged [masques](#), allowed Shakespeare to introduce more elaborate stage devices. In *Cymbeline*, for example, [Jupiter](#) descends "in thunder and lightning, sitting upon an eagle: he throws a thunderbolt. The ghosts fall on their knees."^[111]

The actors in Shakespeare's company included the famous [Richard Burbage](#), [William Kempe](#), [Henry Condell](#) and [John Heminges](#). Burbage played the leading role in the first performances of many of Shakespeare's plays, including *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*.^[112] The popular comic actor Will Kempe played the servant Peter in *Romeo and Juliet* and [Dogberry](#) in *Much Ado About Nothing*, among other characters.^[113] He was replaced around the turn of the 16th century by [Robert Armin](#), who played roles such as [Touchstone](#) in *As You Like It* and the fool in *King Lear*.^[114] In 1613, Sir [Henry Wotton](#) recorded that *Henry VIII* "was set forth with many extraordinary circumstances of pomp and ceremony".^[115] On 29 June, however, a cannon set fire to the thatch of the Globe and burned the theatre to the ground, an event which pinpoints the date of a Shakespeare play with rare precision.^[115]

Textual sources



Title page of the [First Folio](#), 1623. Copper engraving of Shakespeare by [Martin Droeshout](#).

In 1623, [John Heminges](#) and [Henry Condell](#), two of Shakespeare's friends from the King's Men, published the [First Folio](#), a collected edition of Shakespeare's plays. It contained 36 texts, including 18 printed for the first time.^[116] Many of the plays had already appeared in [quarto](#) versions—flimsy books made from sheets of paper folded twice to make four leaves.^[117] No evidence suggests that Shakespeare approved these editions, which the First Folio describes as "stol'n and surreptitious copies".^[118] [Alfred Pollard](#) termed some of them "[bad quartos](#)" because of their adapted, paraphrased or garbled texts, which may in places have been reconstructed from memory.^[119] Where several versions of a play survive, each [differs from the other](#). The differences may stem from copying or [printing](#) errors, from notes by actors or audience members, or from Shakespeare's own [papers](#).^[120] In some cases, for example *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida* and *Othello*, Shakespeare could have revised the texts between the quarto and folio editions. In the case of *King Lear*, however, while most modern additions do conflate them, the 1623 folio version is so different from the 1608 quarto, that the *Oxford Shakespeare* prints them both, arguing that they cannot be conflated without confusion.^[121]

Poems

In 1593 and 1594, when the theatres were closed because of [plague](#), Shakespeare published two narrative poems on erotic themes, [Venus and Adonis](#) and [The Rape of Lucrece](#). He dedicated them to [Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton](#). In *Venus and Adonis*, an innocent [Adonis](#) rejects the sexual advances of [Venus](#); while in *The Rape of Lucrece*, the virtuous wife [Lucrece](#) is raped by the lustful [Tarquin](#).^[122] Influenced by [Ovid's Metamorphoses](#),^[123] the poems show the guilt and moral confusion that result from uncontrolled lust.^[124] Both proved popular and were often reprinted during Shakespeare's lifetime. A third narrative poem, [A Lover's Complaint](#), in which a young woman laments her seduction by a persuasive suitor, was printed in the first edition of the *Sonnets* in 1609. Most scholars now accept that Shakespeare wrote *A Lover's Complaint*. Critics consider that its fine qualities are marred by leaden effects.^[125] [The Phoenix and the Turtle](#), printed in Robert Chester's 1601 *Love's Martyr*, mourns the deaths of the legendary [phoenix](#) and his lover, the faithful [turtle dove](#). In 1599, two early drafts of sonnets 138 and 144 appeared in [The Passionate Pilgrim](#), published under Shakespeare's name but without his permission.^[126]

Sonnets

Main article: [Shakespeare's sonnets](#)



Title page from 1609 edition of *Shake-Speares Sonnets*.

Published in 1609, the [Sonnets](#) were the last of Shakespeare's non-dramatic works to be printed. Scholars are not certain when each of the 154 sonnets was composed, but evidence suggests that Shakespeare wrote sonnets throughout his career for a private readership.^[127] Even before the two unauthorised sonnets appeared in *The Passionate Pilgrim* in 1599, [Francis Meres](#) had referred in 1598 to Shakespeare's "sugred Sonnets among his private friends".^[128] Few analysts believe that the published collection follows Shakespeare's intended sequence.^[129] He seems to have planned two contrasting series: one about uncontrollable lust for a married woman of dark complexion (the "dark lady"), and one about conflicted love for a fair young man (the "fair youth"). It remains unclear if these figures represent real individuals, or if the authorial "I" who addresses them represents Shakespeare himself, though [Wordsworth](#) believed that with the sonnets "Shakespeare unlocked his heart".^[130]

The 1609 edition was dedicated to a "Mr. W.H.", credited as "the only begetter" of the poems. It

is not known whether this was written by Shakespeare himself or by the publisher, [Thomas Thorpe](#), whose initials appear at the foot of the dedication page; nor is it known who Mr. W.H. was, despite numerous theories, or whether Shakespeare even authorised the publication.^[132] Critics praise the *Sonnets* as a profound meditation on the nature of love, sexual passion, procreation, death, and time.^[133]

Style

Main article: [Shakespeare's style](#)

Shakespeare's first plays were written in the conventional style of the day. He wrote them in a stylised language that does not always spring naturally from the needs of the characters or the drama.^[134] The poetry depends on extended, sometimes elaborate metaphors and conceits, and the language is often rhetorical—written for actors to declaim rather than speak. The grand speeches in *Titus Andronicus*, in the view of some critics, often hold up the action, for example; and the verse in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* has been described as stilted.^[135]

Soon, however, Shakespeare began to adapt the traditional styles to his own purposes. The opening [soliloquy](#) of *Richard III* has its roots in the self-declaration of [Vice](#) in medieval drama. At the same time, Richard's vivid self-awareness looks forward to the soliloquies of Shakespeare's mature plays.^[136] No single play marks a change from the traditional to the freer style. Shakespeare combined the two throughout his career, with *Romeo and Juliet* perhaps the best example of the mixing of the styles.^[137] By the time of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard II*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the mid-1590s, Shakespeare had begun to write a more natural poetry. He increasingly tuned his metaphors and images to the needs of the drama itself.

Pity by [William Blake](#), 1795, [Tate Britain](#), is an illustration of two similes in *Macbeth*: "And pity, like a naked new-born babe, / Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, hors'd / Upon the sightless couriers of the air".

Shakespeare's standard poetic form was [blank verse](#), composed in [iambic pentameter](#). In practice, this meant that his verse was usually unrhymed and consisted of ten syllables to a line, spoken with a stress on every second syllable. The blank verse of his early plays is quite different from that of his later ones. It is often beautiful, but its sentences tend to start, pause, and finish at the [end of lines](#), with the risk of monotony.^[138] Once Shakespeare mastered

traditional blank verse, he began to interrupt and vary its flow. This technique releases the new power and flexibility of the poetry in plays such as [Julius Caesar](#) and [Hamlet](#). Shakespeare uses it, for example, to convey the turmoil in Hamlet's mind:^[139]

*Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting
That would not let me sleep. Methought I lay
Worse than the mutines in the bilboes. Rashly—
And prais'd be rashness for it—let us know
Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well...
Hamlet, Act 5, Scene 2, 4–8^[139]*

After *Hamlet*, Shakespeare varied his poetic style further, particularly in the more emotional passages of the late tragedies. The literary critic [A. C. Bradley](#) described this style as "more concentrated, rapid, varied, and, in construction, less regular, not seldom twisted or elliptical".^[140] In the last phase of his career, Shakespeare adopted many techniques to achieve these effects. These included [run-on lines](#), irregular pauses and stops, and extreme variations in sentence structure and length.^[141] In *Macbeth*, for example, the language darts from one unrelated metaphor or simile to another: "was the hope drunk/ Wherein you dressed yourself?" (1.7.35–38); "...pity, like a naked new-born babe/ Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, hors'd/ Upon the sightless couriers of the air..." (1.7.21–25). The listener is challenged to complete the sense.^[141] The late romances, with their shifts in time and surprising turns of plot, inspired a last poetic style in which long and short sentences are set against one another, clauses are piled up, subject and object are reversed, and words are omitted, creating an effect of spontaneity.^[142]

Shakespeare combined poetic genius with a practical sense of the theatre.^[143] Like all playwrights of the time, he dramatised stories from sources such as [Plutarch](#) and [Holinshed](#).^[144] He reshaped each plot to create several centres of interest and to show as many sides of a narrative to the audience as possible. This strength of design ensures that a Shakespeare play can survive translation, cutting and wide interpretation without loss to its core drama.^[145] As Shakespeare's mastery grew, he gave his characters clearer and more varied motivations and distinctive patterns of speech. He preserved aspects of his earlier style in the later plays, however. In [Shakespeare's late romances](#), he deliberately returned to a more

artificial style, which emphasised the illusion of theatre.^[146]

Influence

Main article: [William Shakespeare's influence](#)

Macbeth Consulting the Vision of the Armed Head. By [Henry Fuseli](#), 1793–94. [Folger Shakespeare Library](#), Washington.

Shakespeare's work has made a lasting impression on later theatre and literature. In particular, he expanded the dramatic potential of [characterisation](#), plot, [language](#), and [genre](#).^[147] Until *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, romance had not been viewed as a worthy topic for tragedy.^[148] [Soliloquies](#) had been used mainly to convey information about characters or events; but Shakespeare used them to explore characters' minds.^[149] His work heavily influenced later poetry. The [Romantic poets](#) attempted to revive Shakespearean verse drama, though with little success. Critic [George Steiner](#) described all English verse dramas from [Coleridge](#) to [Tennyson](#) as "feeble variations on Shakespearean themes."^[150]

Shakespeare influenced novelists such as [Thomas Hardy](#), [William Faulkner](#), and [Charles Dickens](#). The American novelist [Herman Melville's](#) soliloquies owe much to Shakespeare; his Captain Ahab in *Moby-Dick* is a classic [tragic hero](#), inspired by *King Lear*.^[151] Scholars have identified 20,000 pieces of music linked to Shakespeare's works. These include two operas by [Giuseppe Verdi](#), *Otello* and *Falstaff*, whose critical standing compares with that of the source plays.^[152] Shakespeare has also inspired many painters, including the Romantics and the [Pre-Raphaelites](#). The Swiss Romantic artist [Henry Fuseli](#), a friend of [William Blake](#), even translated *Macbeth* into German.^[153] The [psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud](#) drew on Shakespearean psychology, in particular that of Hamlet, for his theories of human nature.^[154]

In Shakespeare's day, English grammar, spelling and pronunciation were less standardised than they are now,^[155] and his use of language helped shape modern English.^[156] [Samuel Johnson](#) quoted him more often than any other author in his *A Dictionary of the English Language*, the first serious work of its type.^[157] Expressions such as "with bated breath" (*Merchant of Venice*) and "a foregone conclusion" (*Othello*) have found their way into everyday English speech.^[158]

Critical reputation

Main articles: [William Shakespeare's reputation](#) and [Timeline of Shakespeare criticism](#)

Shakespeare was not revered in his lifetime, but he received a large amount of praise.^[160] In 1598, the cleric and author [Francis Meres](#) singled him out from a group of English writers as "the most excellent" in both comedy and tragedy.^[161] And the authors of the *Parnassus* plays at [St John's College, Cambridge](#), numbered him with [Chaucer](#), [Gower](#) and [Spenser](#).^[162] In the *First Folio*, [Ben Jonson](#) called Shakespeare the "Soul of the age, the applause, delight, the wonder of our stage", though he had remarked elsewhere that "Shakespeare wanted art".

A recently garlanded statue of William Shakespeare in [Lincoln Park, Chicago](#), typical of many created in the 19th and early 20th century.

Between [the Restoration](#) of the monarchy in 1660 and the end of the 17th century, classical ideas were in vogue. As a result, critics of the time mostly rated Shakespeare below [John Fletcher](#) and [Ben Jonson](#).^[163] [Thomas Rymer](#), for example, condemned Shakespeare for mixing the comic with the tragic. Nevertheless, poet and critic [John Dryden](#) rated Shakespeare highly, saying of Jonson, "I admire him, but I love Shakespeare".^[164] For several decades, Rymer's view held sway; but during the 18th century, critics began to respond to Shakespeare on his own terms and acclaim what they termed his natural genius. A series of scholarly editions of his work, notably those of [Samuel Johnson](#) in 1765 and [Edmond Malone](#) in 1790, added to his growing reputation.^[165] By 1800, he was firmly enshrined as the national poet.^[166] In the 18th and 19th centuries, his reputation also spread abroad. Among those who championed him were the writers [Voltaire](#), [Goethe](#), [Stendhal](#) and [Victor Hugo](#).^[167]

During the [Romantic era](#), Shakespeare was praised by the poet and literary philosopher [Samuel Taylor Coleridge](#); and the critic [August Wilhelm Schlegel](#) translated his plays in the spirit of [German Romanticism](#).^[168] In the 19th century, critical admiration for Shakespeare's genius often bordered on adulation.^[169] "That King Shakespeare," the essayist [Thomas Carlyle](#) wrote in 1840, "does not he shine, in crowned sovereignty, over us all, as the noblest, gentlest, yet strongest of rallying signs; indestructible".^[170] The [Victorians](#) produced his plays as lavish spectacles on a grand scale.^[171] The playwright and critic [George Bernard Shaw](#) mocked the cult of Shakespeare worship as "[bardolatry](#)". He claimed that the new [naturalism](#) of [Ibsen's](#) plays had made Shakespeare obsolete.^[172]

The modernist revolution in the arts during the early 20th century, far from discarding Shakespeare, eagerly enlisted his work in the service of the [avant-garde](#). The [Expressionists in Germany](#) and the [Futurists](#) in Moscow mounted productions of his plays. Marxist playwright and director [Bertolt Brecht](#) devised an [epic theatre](#) under the influence of Shakespeare. The poet and critic [T. S. Eliot](#) argued against Shaw that Shakespeare's "primitiveness" in fact made him truly modern.^[173] Eliot, along with [G. Wilson Knight](#) and the school of [New Criticism](#), led a movement towards a closer reading of Shakespeare's imagery. In the 1950s, a wave of new critical approaches replaced modernism and paved the way for "post-modern" studies of Shakespeare.^[174] By the 1980s, Shakespeare studies were open to movements such as [structuralism](#), feminism, [New Historicism](#), [African American studies](#), and [queer studies](#).^{[175][176]}

Speculation about Shakespeare

Authorship

Main article: [Shakespeare authorship question](#)

Around 230 years after Shakespeare's death, doubts began to be expressed about the authorship of the works attributed to him.^[177] Proposed alternative candidates include [Francis Bacon](#), [Christopher Marlowe](#), and [Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford](#).^[178] Several "group theories" have also been proposed.^[179] Only a small minority of academics believe there is reason to question the traditional attribution,^[180] but interest in the subject, particularly the [Oxfordian theory of Shakespeare authorship](#), continues into the 21st century.^[181]

Religion

Main article: [William Shakespeare's religion](#)

Some scholars claim that members of Shakespeare's family were Catholics, at a time when Catholic practice was against the law.^[182] Shakespeare's mother, [Mary Arden](#), certainly came from a pious Catholic family. The strongest evidence might be a Catholic statement of faith signed by [John Shakespeare](#), found in 1757 in the rafters of his former house in Henley Street.

The document is now lost, however, and scholars differ as to its authenticity.^[183] In 1591 the authorities reported that John Shakespeare had missed church "for fear of process for debt", a common Catholic excuse.^[184] In 1606 the name of William's daughter Susanna appears on a list of those who failed to attend Easter [communion](#) in Stratford.^[184] Scholars find evidence both for and against Shakespeare's Catholicism in his plays, but the truth may be impossible to prove either way.^[185]

Sexuality

Main article: [Sexuality of William Shakespeare](#)

Few details of Shakespeare's sexuality are known. At 18, he married the 26-year-old [Anne Hathaway](#), who was pregnant. Susanna, the first of their three children, was born six months later on 26 May 1583. Over the centuries some readers have posited that Shakespeare's sonnets are autobiographical,^[186] and point to them as evidence of his love for a young man. Others read the same passages as the expression of intense friendship rather than sexual love.^[187] The 26 so-called "[Dark Lady](#)" sonnets, addressed to a married woman, are taken as evidence of heterosexual liaisons.^[188]

Portraiture

Main article: [Portraits of Shakespeare](#)

No written contemporary description of Shakespeare's physical appearance survives, and no evidence suggests that he ever commissioned a portrait, so the [Droeshout engraving](#), which [Ben Jonson](#) approved of as a good likeness,^[189] and his [Stratford monument](#) provide the best evidence of his appearance. From the 18th century, the desire for authentic Shakespeare portraits fuelled claims that various surviving pictures depicted Shakespeare. That demand also led to the production of several fake portraits, as well as mis-attributions, repaintings and relabelling of portraits of other people.^[190]

List of works

Further information: [Shakespeare bibliography](#) and [Chronology of Shakespeare's plays](#)

Classification of the plays

The Plays of William Shakespeare. By [Sir John Gilbert](#), 1849.

Shakespeare's works include the 36 plays printed in the [First Folio](#) of 1623, listed below according to their folio classification as [comedies](#), [histories](#) and [tragedies](#).^[191] Two plays not included in the First Folio, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, are now accepted as part of the canon, with scholars agreed that Shakespeare made a major contribution to their composition.^[192] No Shakespearean poems were included in the First Folio.

In the late 19th century, [Edward Dowden](#) classified four of the late comedies as [romances](#), and though many scholars prefer to call them [tragicomedies](#), his term is often used.^[193] These plays and the associated *Two Noble Kinsmen* are marked with an asterisk (*) below. In 1896, [Frederick S. Boas](#) coined the term "[problem plays](#)" to describe four plays: *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, *Troilus and Cressida* and *Hamlet*.^[194] "Dramas as singular in theme and temper cannot be strictly called comedies or tragedies", he wrote. "We may therefore borrow a convenient phrase from the theatre of today and class them together as Shakespeare's problem plays."^[195] The term, much debated and sometimes applied to other plays, remains in use, though *Hamlet* is definitively classed as a tragedy.^[196] The other problem plays are marked below with a double dagger (‡).

Plays thought to be only partly written by Shakespeare are marked with a dagger (†) below. Other works occasionally attributed to him are listed as apocrypha.

William Shakespeare Biography describes the life of William Shakespeare. From birth to death, Shakespeare Biography describes all that is known about Shakespeare's life from available documentation including court and church records, marriage certificates and criticisms by Shakespeare's rivals.

Shakespeare (1564-1616): Who was he?

Though William Shakespeare is recognized as one of literature's greatest influences, very little is actually known about him. What we do know about his life comes from registrar records,

court records, wills, marriage certificates and his tombstone. Anecdotes and criticisms by his rivals also speak of the famous playwright and suggest that he was indeed a playwright, poet and an actor.

Date of Birth? (1564)

William was born in 1564. We know this from the earliest record we have of his life; his baptism which happened on Wednesday, April the 26th, 1564. We don't actually know his birthday but from this record we assume he was born in 1564. Similarly by knowing the famous Bard's baptism date, we can guess that he was born three days earlier on St. George's day, though we have no conclusive proof of this.

Brothers and Sisters.

William was the third child of John and Mary Shakespeare. The first two were daughters and William was himself followed by Gilbert who died in 1612 and Richard who died in 1613. Edmund (1580-1607), sixth in the line was baptized on May the third, 1580 and William's oldest living sister was Joan who outlived her famous playwright brother. Of William's seven siblings, only Judith and four of his brothers survived to adulthood.

William's Father.

From baptism records, we know William's father was a John Shakespeare, said to be a town official of Stratford and a local businessman who dabbled in tanning, leatherwork and whittawering which is working with white leather to make items like purses and gloves. John also dealt in grain and sometimes was described as a glover by trade.

John was also a prominent man in Stratford. By 1560, he was one of fourteen burgesses which formed the town council. Interestingly, William himself is often described as a keen businessman so we can assume he got his business acumen from his father. In the Bard's case, the apple didn't fall far from the tree at all...

William's mother: Mary Arden.

William's mother was Mary Arden who married John Shakespeare in 1557. The youngest daughter in her family, she inherited much of her father's landowning and farming estate when he died.

Early Days on Henley Street...

Since we know Stratford's famous Bard lived with his father, John Shakespeare, we can

presume that he grew up in Henley Street, some one hundred miles northwest of London.

The Bard's Education.

Very little is known about literature's most famous playwright. We know that the King's New Grammar School taught boys basic reading and writing. We assume William attended this school since it existed to educate the sons of Stratford but we have no definite proof. Likewise a lack of evidence suggests that William, whose works are studied universally at Universities, never attended one himself!

William marries an older woman. (1582)

A bond certificate dated November the 28th, 1582, reveals that an eighteen year old William married the twenty-six and pregnant Anne Hathaway. Barely seven months later, they had his first daughter, Susanna. Anne never left Stratford, living there her entire life.

The Bard's children. (1583 & 1592)

Baptism records show that William's first child, Susanna was baptized in Stratford sometime in May, 1583. Baptism records again reveal that twins Hamnet and Judith were born in February 1592. Hamnet, William's only son died in 1596, just eleven years old. Hamnet and Judith were named after William's close friends, Judith and Hamnet Sadler. William's family was unusually small in a time when families had many children to ensure parents were cared for in later years despite the very high mortality rates of children and also their life expectancy in the 1500s.

The Bard as a poet.

Evidence that the great Bard was also a poet comes from his entering his first poem *Venus and Adonis* in the Stationers' Registrar on the 18th of April, 1593. The playwright registered his second poem *The Rape of Lucrece* by name on the 9th of May, 1594.

The Bard suffers breach of copyright. (1609)

In 1609, the Bard's sonnets were published without the Bard's permission. It is considered unlikely that William wanted many of his deeply personal poems to be revealed to the outside world. It was not however the first time; in 1599, in a collection entitled "*The Passionate Pilgrim*" , two of his poems had been printed without William's permission.

The Bard's lost years?

Looking for work in London, just four days ride way from Stratford, William is believed to have

left his family back home for some twenty years whilst he pursued his craft. He only returned back to his family in 1609, having visited only during the forty day period of Lent when theatres though open well into the start of Lent would later close in accordance with the traditional banning of all forms of diversionary entertainment around this important Easter event.

William applies for a Coat of Arms. (1596)

Records with the College of Heralds, reveal William applied for a coat of arms. Despite a lack of proof, he was granted his request. Later in 1599 he applied for his mother's coat of arms to be added to his own.

William buys major residential property. (1597)

At age 15, William purchased the New Place. This was one of the most prominent and desired properties in all of Stratford being the second largest house in town. Given his father's known financial hardship from 1576, William must either have used his own money to buy this expensive property or his father had placed money in his son's name. It is possible William might have bought this prominent property with money from his plays. It is estimated that roughly fifteen of his 37 plays would have been written and performed by 1597!

Will flats in London. (Circa 1601-1604)

Court records of a dispute between William's landlord Christopher Mountjoy and his son-in-law Stephen Belott confirm that William was living in London around 1601. The playwright's name is recorded in the court records when he gave testimony in 1612 concerning Mountjoy and Belott's dispute. Interestingly, in 1601, he bought roughly 107 acres of arable land with twenty acres of pasturage for 20 pounds in Old Stratford.

The Bard strikes it rich.

William made his greatest financial gain in 1605 when he purchased leases of real estate near Stratford. This investment of some four hundred and forty pounds doubled in value and earned him 60 pounds income each year. Some academics speculate that this investment gave the Bard the time he needed to write plays uninterrupted and we know that he was indeed thought of as a businessman in the Stratford area...

A friend passes away.

Yet another record confirming the Bard's existence was John Comb's will which bequeathed to the Bard the princely sum of just five pounds.

The Bard's will and death.

Records reveal that the great Bard revised his will on March the 25th, 1616. Less than a month later, he died on April the 23rd, 1616. Literature's famous Bard is buried at the Holy Trinity Church in Stratford. He infamously left his second-best bed to his wife Anne Hathaway and little else, giving most of his estate to his eldest daughter Susanna who has married a prominent and distinguished physician named John Hall in June 1607. This was not as callous as it seems; the Bard's best bed was for guests; his second-best bed was his marriage bed... His will also named actors Richard Burbage, Henry Condell and John Hemminges, providing proof to academics today that William was involved in theatre. The Bard's direct line of descendants ended some 54 years later until Susanna's daughter Elizabeth died in 1670.

The Bard's last words...

Written upon William Shakespeare's tombstone is an appeal that he be left to rest in peace with a curse on those who would move his bones...

*Good friend, for Jesús sake forbear
To digg the dust enclosed here!
Blest be ye man that spares thes stones
And curst be he that moues my bones.*

Translated this reads as:

*Good friend, for Jesus' sake, forbear
To dig the dust enclosed here;
Blest be the man that spares these stones
And curst he that moves my bones.*

Did Shakespeare write the 37 plays and 154 sonnets credited to him?

The evidence above proves William existed but not that he was a playwright nor an actor nor a poet. In fact recently some academics who call themselves the Oxfords argue that Stratford's celebrated playwright did not write any of the plays attributed to him. They suggest that he was merely a businessman and propose several contenders for authorship, namely an Edward de Vere.

Evidence that the great Bard wrote his plays.

The earliest proof that William did indeed write 37 plays was Robert Greene's criticism of the Bard in his *Groatsworth of Wit, Bought with a Million of Repentance* which attacked Shakespeare for having the nerve to compete with him and other playwrights in 1592. Robert Greene made this quite clear by calling him "*an upstart crow*". This criticism was placed with the Stationers' Registrar on the 20th of September, 1592.

Proof that William was an actor comes from his own performances before Queen Elizabeth herself in 1594 and evidence of William's interest in theatre comes from the Bard's name being listed in 1594 and 1595 as a shareholder (part owner) of the Lord Chamberlain's Company, a theatre company.

The Bard's reputation as a poet is again confirmed in 1598, when Francis Meres attacked him as being "*mellifluous*" and described his work as honey-tongued, "*sugared sonnets among his private friends*" in his own *Palladis Tamia* of 1598.

William's theatre presence is again confirmed by his name being recorded as one of the owners of the Globe theatre in 1599 and on May the 19th, 1603, he received a patent, titling him as one of the King's Men (previously called the Chamberlain's men) and a Groom of the Chamber by James I, the then King of England. This honour made William a favorite for all court performances, earned each King's man extra money (30 pounds each for a performance in 1603 alone) and made the Bard's name one rather above reproach. Macbeth which celebrates King James I ancestor Malcolm, is considered to have been written in part as appreciation for the King's patronage. And as a potent form of royalist propaganda (it warned of the dangers of killing a King appointed like James, by God).

The First Folio (1623): Conclusive proof that Shakespeare authored his plays.

The proof most often cited that Shakespeare authored his plays however, was the First Folio (1623) where Henry Condell and John Hemminges who were actors in the Bard's theatre company, claim in a dedicatory verse within the Folio that they recorded and collected his plays as a memorial to the late actor and playwright. In terms of value, the First Folio originally was sold for just 1 Pound in 1623. Today as one of just 250 still in existence, it would fetch nearly 3 million dollars (US).

Ben Jonson criticizes and then praises William by name.

Further proof of authorship comes in the form of a poem by Ben Jonson, one of the Bard's more friendly rivals, which criticizes the playwrights dramatic plays. It is contained within a work entitled *Discoveries* (also known as *Timber*) dated 1641. Despite his criticism, Ben Johnson

paradoxically also said that Stratford's famous Bard's works were timeless, describing them as *"not of an age, but for all time"*.

1-1 of 1



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