

The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool."

–William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare - Mini Biography (TV-14; 04:43) Though little is known about William Shakespeare's personal life, his works such as "Hamlet," "Romeo and Juliet," and "King Lear," have influenced literature and theater for over 400 years.

Synopsis

William Shakespeare was baptized on April 26, 1564, in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. From roughly 1594 onward he was an important member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men company of theatrical players. Written records give little indication of the way in which Shakespeare's professional life molded his artistry. 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.

Mysterious Origins

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.

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. William had two older sisters, Joan and Judith, and three younger brothers, Gilbert, Richard and Edmund. 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. Scholars call this period the "lost years," and there is wide speculation on what he was doing during this period. One theory is that he might have gone into hiding for poaching game from the local landlord, Sir Thomas Lucy. Another possibility is that he might have been working as an assistant schoolmaster in Lancashire. 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, a scenario updated centuries later by the countless aspiring actors and playwrights in Hollywood and Broadway.

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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. The September 20, 1592 edition of the Stationers' Register (a guild publication) includes an article by London playwright Robert Greene that takes a few jabs at William Shakespeare: "...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," Greene wrote of Shakespeare.

Scholars differ on the interpretation of this criticism, but most agree that it was Greene's way of saying Shakespeare was reaching above his rank, trying to match better known and educated playwrights like Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Nashe or Greene himself.

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. Early in his career, Shakespeare was able to attract the attention of Henry Wriothesley, the Earl of Southampton, to whom he dedicated his first- and second-published poems: "Venus and Adonis" (1593) and "The Rape of Lucrece" (1594).

Establishing Himself

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.

Writing Style

William Shakespeare's early plays were written in the conventional style of the day, with elaborate metaphors and rhetorical phrases that didn't always align naturally with the story's plot or characters. However, Shakespeare was very innovative, adapting the traditional style to his own purposes and creating a freer flow of words. With only small degrees of variation, Shakespeare primarily used a metrical pattern consisting of lines of unrhymed iambic pentameter, or blank verse, to compose his plays. At the same time, there are passages in all the plays that deviate from this and use forms of poetry or simple prose.

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.

Death

Tradition has it that William Shakespeare died on his birthday, April 23, 1616, though many scholars believe this is a myth. Church records show he was interred at Trinity Church on April 5, 1616.

In his will, he left the bulk of his possessions to his eldest daughter, Susanna. Though entitled to a third of his estate, little seems to have gone to his wife, Anne, whom he bequeathed his "second-best bed." This has drawn speculation that she had fallen out of favor, or that the couple was not close. However, there is very little evidence the two had a difficult marriage. Other scholars note that the term "second-best bed" often refers to the bed belonging to the household's master and mistress—the marital bed—and the "first-best bed" was reserved for guests.

Controversy and Literary Legacy

About 150 years after his death, questions arose about the authorship of William Shakespeare's plays. Scholars and literary critics began to float names like Christopher Marlowe, Edward de Vere and Francis Bacon—men of more known backgrounds, literary accreditation, or inspiration—as the true authors of the 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. Over the centuries, several groups have emerged that question the authorship of Shakespeare's plays.

The most serious and intense skepticism began in the 19th century when adoration for Shakespeare was at its highest. The detractors believed that the only hard evidence surrounding William Shakespeare from

Stratford-upon-Avon described a man from modest beginnings who married young and became successful in real estate. Members of the Shakespeare Oxford Society (founded in 1957) put forth arguments that English aristocrat Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, was the true author of the poems and plays of "William Shakespeare." The Oxfordians cite de Vere's extensive knowledge of aristocratic society, his education, and the structural similarities between his poetry and that found in the works attributed to Shakespeare. They contend that William Shakespeare had neither the education nor the literary training to write such eloquent prose and create such rich characters.

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*. Royal records from 1601 show that William Shakespeare was recognized as a member of the King's Men theater company (formally known as the Chamberlain's Men) and a Groom of the Chamber by the court of King James I, where the company performed seven of Shakespeare's plays. There is also strong circumstantial evidence of personal relationships by contemporaries who interacted with Shakespeare as an actor and a playwright.

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.