



William Shakespeare: Life, Works & Historical Background

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1. An Introduction to William Shakespeare: Life

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, a market town north-west of London. He was the third child and eldest son of John and Mary Shakespeare. His father was a successful businessman and landowner who held several important posts in the local council till 1576 when the decline in the fortune of the Shakespeare family started. During his better days John Shakespeare had applied for a coat-of-arms which was finally granted in the last year of his life. 1601. elevating the Shakespeare family to the status of the gentry'. Not much is known about the early life of Shakespeare except that he must have attended local grammar school and married Anne Hathaway in 1582 and had three children -Susanna, Judith and Hamnet. It is said that Shakespeare fled to London sometime around 1585/86 to escape the wrath of Sir Thomas Lucy of Cherle cot near Stratford, after hunting deer illegally in his private park. but it is more likely that he joined a London-based visiting theatre company that had come to perform at Stratford. Shakespeare started in the lowest rung of theatre hierarchy. probably as a stable boy who looked after the horses of the more prosperous audience as they watched the show.

From a handyman doing odd jobs for the company to an actor in bit parts to the lead writer and finally, in 1594, a shareholder in the newly formed Lord Chamberlain's Men who performed at the playhouse called Theatre in Shoreditch. London, Shakespeare's rise was arduous but fairly quick. He stayed on with the Company when it shifted to the Globe theatre-house across the river Thames and changed its name to King's Men in 1603. His financial prosperity in an age when most playwrights either died poor or in debt, earned him the jealousy of the author, Robert Greene, who labeled him an "upstart Crow" in his Groatworth of Wit, Bought with a Million of Repentance (1592). In 1596, Shakespeare bought New Place, the finest house in Stratford-upon-Avon, and thereafter continued to invest in business and property in his hometown although he continued to live and work in London as the resident playwright and a major shareholder of his Company. By 1613. he was living mostly in Stratford, actively involved in his business and landed affairs and had stopped writing plays altogether. But he still had financial interests in the King's Men Company that is testified by his investment in rebuilding the Globe playhouse after it was burnt down during a performance of Henry VIII in 1613. He died of fever on 23 April 1616, presumably contracted from lying in the open the whole night after a drunken bout with fellow authors, Michael Drayton (1563-1631) and Ben Jonson (1572-1637). He was buried in the Stratford church. The epitaph' on his gravestone says,

“Good friend for Jesus sake
forebear, to dig the dust enclosed
here!

Blest be the man that spares these stones
And curst be he that moves my bones.”

2. William Shakespeare: Works

Shakespeare wrote two long poems Venus and Adonis (1593) and Rape of Lucrece (1594), which established his reputation in the fashionable circles of London. His 154 sonnets, written in the late 1590s, were published in 1609. Of these, 126 are addressed to a young man while the rest are directed

ata “dark lady” whose real identities are still hotly debated. The sonnets explore, with great verbal compression and ingenuity. the complex relationship between the poet and the two persons addressed. Although Shakespeare records feelings of pain, betrayal and abandonment, the power of poetic creativity to defy the ravages of time is celebrated at such length that the figure of the poet emerges as the central character of the sonnets. The 1609 edition of sonnets also included a poem “A Lover's Complaint” (begun 1602/05, completed 1608-09) which tells of the sexual ruin of a young woman seduced and deceived by a young man. Apart from these, Shakespeare is also said to have written 20 poems published in the collection of poems entitled *The Passionate Pilgrim* (1599) and “The Phoenix and the Turtle” (1601).

However, Shakespeare’s fame rests on the 37 plays written by him, which have been translated, adapted, performed and filmed in almost all languages of the world. Apart from these plays, he is said to have collaborated with John Fletcher to write *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1613-14) and two lost plays, *Love's Labour's Won* (1596-97) and *Cardenio* (1613?) have been attributed to him. There is also some doubt as to whether *Pericles* is authored entirely by Shakespeare or in collaboration with George Wilkins. As the list below indicates, his plays cover all genres-from tragedies and comedies to histories, problem play and romances-indicating his mastery of the stage. His early works belong to the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603) but his most famous tragedies, problem plays, and romances belong the Jacobean period, i.e., the reign of King James (1603-1625).

Composi- tion Date	Histories	Comedies	Tragedies	Problem plays	Roman- ces/tragi- comedies	Important events
1588-91		<i>The Comedy of Errors</i> (1623)				British navy defeats the Spanish Armada; William Lee invents the steel Knitting loom; Lyly: <i>Endymion</i> ; Greene: <i>Friar Bacon & Friar Bungay</i> ; Kyd: <i>Hamlet</i> ; Marlowe: <i>Jew of Malta</i>
1590-91	<i>Henry VI (1594)</i> <i>Henry VI (1595)</i>	<i>The Two Gentlemen of Verona</i> (1623)				Law students & apprentices clash in London; <i>Edward III & King Leir</i> (Anon.) published; tea comes to England; Earl of Essex leads expedition to aid Henry IV of France
1591-92	<i>Henry VI (1623)</i>					London theatres closed on account of plague; Marlowe:

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						<i>Dr. Faustus</i> , Greene: <i>Groatsworth of Wit</i>
1592-94	<i>Richard III</i> (1597)	<i>The Taming of the Shrew</i> (1623)	<i>Titus Andronicus</i> (1594)			Plague continues; church attendance made mandatory; Henry IV of France embraces Catholicism
1594-96	<i>Love's Labour's Lost</i> (1598) <i>A Mid-summer Night's Dream</i> (1600)	<i>Romeo And Juliet</i> (1597)				Portuguese Roderigo Lopez convicted of plotting against Elizabeth I; Henry IV ascends French throne
1595	<i>Richard II</i> (1597)					Food scarcity; grain riots in London; Irish rebellion led by Earl of Tyrone; Walter Raleigh's Guiana expedition; Jesuit poet Robert Southwell executed
1596-97	<i>King John</i> (1623)	<i>The Merchant of Venice</i> (1600)				Rain destroys crop; steep rise in food prices; men conscripted for French wars; peace pact between England & France

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1597	<i>Henry IV</i> (1598)					King of Polonia arrives to woo Elizabeth I; Burbage builds 2nd Blackfriars Theatre
1597-98	<i>Henry IV</i> (1600)	<i>The Merry Wives of Windsor</i> (1602)				Philip II, King of Dies
1598		<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i> (1600)				French civil wars end; Jonson : Every Man in His Humour; Globe theatre built outside London from dismantled pieces of Theatre at Shoreditch
1598-99	<i>Henry V</i> (1600)	<i>As You Like It</i> (1623)				Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, leads Irish expedition, defeated, returns secretly to London; great frost freezes River Thames
1599			<i>Julius Caesar</i> (1623)			London tense; offensive satires banned; Nashe & Harvey forbidden to publish their work
1599-1600		<i>Twelfth Night</i> (1623)				Globe theatre opens; famous comedian Will Kempe leaves

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						Shakespeare's Company & dances from London to Norwich; East India Company founded for trade with India & Far East
1600-02			<i>Hamlet</i> (1603)			Jonson: Cynthia's Revels; Alleyn & Henslowe build to compete Fortune theatre with Globe
1601-02				<i>Troilus and Cressida</i> (1609)		Essex rebellion against Essex Elizabeth put down; beheaded; Richard II performed by Shakespeare's Company irks Elizabeth with its implicit comparison between her & deposed Richard; new Poor Law transfers responsibility of poor relief to parishes
1602-04				<i>All's Well That Ends Well</i> (1623)		Irish rebellion crushed; Bodleian Library opens at Oxford; Salmon Pavy, a famous boy

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						actor, dies; <i>Timon</i> (Anon.)
1603-04			<i>Othello</i> (1622)			Elizabeth dies; James VI, King of Scotland, ascends the English throne as James I; Irish rebel O'Neill surrenders; theatres closed due to plague
1604				<i>Measure for Measure</i> (1623)		Peace with Spain; tax on tobacco; The Book of Common Prayer; Marston : The Malcontent;
1605			<i>King Lear</i> (1607-08) <i>Macbeth</i> (1623)			Gunpowder plot by Guy Fox to blow up James & the Parliament uncovered; Red Bull Theatre built; Jonson's 1st court masque
1605-07			<i>Timon of Athens</i> (1623)			Jesuit Henry Garnet executed for involvement in Gunpowder Plot
1606-07			<i>Antony And Cleopatra</i> (1623)			London & Plymouth Companies given charter to colonise Virginia in America;

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						Act passed to restrain abuses of players : Jonson : <i>Volpone; The Revenger's Tragedy</i> (Anon.)
1607-08			<i>Coriola- mus</i> (1623)		<i>Pericles</i> (1609)	Anti-enclosure riots in Warwickshire, Northampton-shire, Leicestershire; Irish rebels Tyrone, Tryconmel, Hugh Baron escape overseas; colony established in Jamestown, Virginia; Shakespeare enacted on an East India Company ship; Shakespeare's Company leases 2nd Blackfriars theatre for indoor performance; Rowley: <i>Birth of Merlin</i>
1609-10					<i>Cymbeline</i> (1623)	Mulberry trees planted across England by royal order, to encourage silk trade; Moors expelled from Spain

Composi- tion Date	Histories	Comedies	Tragedies	Problem plays	Roman- ces/tragi- comedies	Important events
1610-11					<i>The Winter's Tale</i> (1623)	James dissolves Parliament; decrees that all citizens take an oath of allegiance to him; James's eldest son, Henry, proclaimed Prince of Wales; Jonson: <i>The Alchemist</i>
1611-12					<i>The Tempest</i> (1623)	Marriage alliance between France and Spain; plantation of Ulster in Ireland; Authorised Version of <i>The Bible</i> published; Beaumont & Fletcher: <i>A King and No King</i>
1612-13	<i>Henry VIII</i> (1623)					<i>Heretics Bartholomew Legat & Edward Wightman burnt on the stakes; Henry, Prince of Wales, dies; Lancashire witches executed; Princess Elizabeth, daughter of James I married to Frederick, Elector Palatine; Webster: The White Devil</i>

3. William Shakespeare: Times

Throughout this period, the playhouses the chart above shows that Shakespeare began writing comedies and histories at a time of intense literary activity in England. Against a spin of buoyant 'nationalism initiated by the British victory over the formidable Spanish fleet Only three tragedies 'were penned by him in the 1590s, a decade so marked by epidemics, crop failures, famine, inflation, civil disturbance,

and wars across the continent that it has been labelled by historians as a period of European Crisis. As the London playhouses were often closed due to the scare of the plague, 'most theatre companies including the Lord Chamberlain's Men. survived by touring the provinces.

London was extremely restless and at least twice it was besieged by riotous crowds who threatened to disrupt the status quo. Vagrancy problem accentuated as villagers evicted by force or sheer necessity, roamed the countryside and eventually progressed to London in search of food and work. The government transferred the responsibility of caring for this hapless populace to the local bodies by enacting anew Poor Law in 1601.

While conditions of the common people improved slightly at the beginning of the seventeenth century. the aging queen Elizabeth faced dissension in court from her own previous favorites like the Earl of Essex. People looked forward to a male ruler and welcomed James's ascension to the throne in 1603. Britain had mixed political fortunes in the European arena with occasional tensions with countries like France and Spain but managed to avoid a full-fledged war with either of them.

Ireland proved to a troublesome engagement with constant rebellions against brutal British exploitation. Although late in the fray. Britain joined the colonial race by establishing the East India Company. The Company started as a trading venture in India and Far East, gaining increasing concessions from the local rulers, but by the end of the century they were deeply involved in local politics to gain more power and well on their way to becoming the colonial masters. Colonial settlements came up in the east coast of America as well with many travelling to the New World 'hopeful of a prosperous future, which was rudely belied by the severe hardships. Profits from business ventures and colonial enterprises emboldened the successful citizens to demand a greater sway in the running of the country resulting in a growing rift between the Parliament and King James who Insisted on the "Divine Right of Kingship™~ and unconditional obedience from the subjects.

It emerged as a major source of popular entertainment. Divested from religious ceremonies and thoroughly secularised, they provided amusement for the rich and the poor, and reflected the current concerns of the society. Crossing of conventionally established boundaries was a perennial subject- from Marlowe's Dr. Faustus to Shakespeare's Macbeth. from Jonson's urban satires to Beaumont and Fletcher's delicate tragicomedies. Shakespeare always kept abreast of the public pulse switching from comedy to history to tragedy, revenge plays and tragicomedies as tastes changed. Most contemporary playwrights cannot boast such fluid movement across the various genres. Despite its popularity, theatre and actors had a tenuous relationship with the authorities. Playhouses were ordered to shift outside London across the Thames as the civic authorities considered them potential vice dens capable of disrupting law and order. But every day large sections of the very Londoners, for whose safety the theatres were banished outside London, thronged the theatre houses to enjoy themselves.

Actors too held a precarious position in the Elizabethan and Jacobean society. As the names of the theatre companies suggest, they were patronised by the mighty aristocrats including the king and the queen. and often requisitioned to put up special performances for them. So, they enjoyed close contact with the rulers and lawmakers of the kingdom but on the other hand, as a social group they were situated just above the vagrants and itinerant beggars and subject to rigorous punishment for any misdemeanor. Also, as time progressed the universal appeal of the stage was displaced by a more class and culture specific orientation. In the Elizabethan times public playhouses like the Theatre, Globe etc. staged plays that were watched simultaneously by the lowly apprentice and the high-born courtiers paying different entry fees for the pit and the gallery respectively. In Jacobean times, the number of private theatre houses increased - they provided greater comfort against much higher entry fees that were beyond the reach of the common man. Gradually the plays performed there started catering exclusively to the tastes of the highborn while the public playhouses focused on more lowly audience.

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