

William Shakespeare's Biography

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 his 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 then William was 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 brother.

William's Father.

From baptism records, we know William's father was 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 was also a prominent man in Stratford. By 1560, he was one of fourteen men who 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.

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.

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 28th, 1582, reveals that an 18-year-old William married the twenty-six-year-old Anne Hathaway. 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's lost years?

Looking for work in London, William is believed to have left his family back home for nearly 20 years whilst he pursued his craft. He returned back to his family in 1609, having only visited during the forty-day period of Lent, when theatres would close around this important Easter event.

William applies for a Coat of Arms. (1596)

Records with the College of Herald's, 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 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 property with money from his plays.

The Bard strikes it rich.

William made his greatest financial gain in 1605 when he purchased leases of property near Stratford. This investment of £440 doubled in value and earned him £60 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...

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 had married a prominent and distinguished physician named John Hall in June 1607.

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 Jesus' sake forbear
To digg the dust enclosed here!
Blest be ye man that spares the stones
And curst be he that moves 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 argue that Stratford's celebrated playwright did not write any of the plays attributed to him and suggest that he was merely a businessman.

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. 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.

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 and a Groom of the Chamber by James I, the then King of England. This honour made William a favourite for all court performances, earned each King's man extra money; and made the Bard's name one rather above reproach.

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 in 1623. Today as one of just 250 still in existence, it would fetch nearly \$3 million US dollars.

