

### Nonfiction Excerpt 3: Biography of William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) was an English playwright, poet, and actor who lived during the Renaissance—specifically, during the Elizabethan Age in England. Many people think Shakespeare was the greatest playwright in history. He is often called the Bard of Avon, or simply the Bard. (*Bard* means poet.)

Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, to John and Mary Shakespeare. He was one of eight children, several of whom died while still young. His father was a fairly successful glover (one who makes gloves and other leather products) and a town official, although he probably could not read and write. Shakespeare most likely attended grammar school in Stratford but never went on to a university. Some people think that Shakespeare did not have enough education to write as well as he did. They suggest that his plays were actually written by someone else. Other people, however, argue that Shakespeare’s grammar school education would have been a very solid one.

When he was in his twenties, Shakespeare left his family behind and moved to London to become an actor. Before permanent theaters were built, actors traveled in groups and performed anywhere they could. The groups were entirely male because women were not allowed to be actors. The female characters were usually played by young boys, who were called “apprentices.”

In those days, actors had bad reputations. The traveling actors were thought of as troublemakers because they often attracted rowdy audiences. Seeking respectability, some acting groups asked for the support of noblemen. Often, a nobleman would let a group use his name. One such group was Lord Chamberlain’s Men, later known as The King’s Men, and it was this group that Shakespeare joined. He probably acted in the group and also wrote plays for them. But many theaters had to close because of the bubonic plague, which was a deadly and very contagious disease that was sweeping through Europe at that time.

While the theaters were closed, Shakespeare wrote sonnets, which are a type of poetry. Although Shakespeare was a talented poet, he is most well-known for his thirty-eight plays, which fall into the categories of tragedies (such as *Romeo and Juliet*), comedies (such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*), and histories (such as *Richard III*). Shakespeare often combined categories in a single play; for example, he would mix comedy and tragedy. It was an unusual thing for a playwright to do in those days.

Shakespeare's plays were performed in England's royal courts as well as in theaters, such as the famous Globe Theater. Unlike many theaters in the Elizabethan Age, the Globe welcomed people of all social classes, not just nobles and aristocrats. The aristocrats, however, would pay extra to sit in the upper rows of the theater, which were protected from the rain and sun. (The Globe had an open roof.) People who could afford only the one-penny entrance fee stood in the space near the stage and were called "groundlings." They were usually a rowdy bunch. They often interacted with the people on stage, yelling encouragement or insults. Sometimes the groundlings threw rotten fruit at the actors and even climbed on stage to fight with them. Shakespeare himself might have been on the Globe stage; many scholars believe he acted in minor roles in his own plays.

People from all social and educational classes enjoyed Shakespeare's work because Shakespeare understood human nature. His stories were about situations and emotions that most people could understand: for example, love, hate, jealousy, and grief. Like real people, most of Shakespeare's characters were neither entirely good nor entirely bad.

Shakespeare's plays are still popular today throughout the world. Many of his plays have been made into movies, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Hamlet*. Shakespeare's influence is also evident in many of the English words we use every day. Scholars estimate that Shakespeare made up about 1,500 words, including *advertising*, *alligator*, *bedroom*, *lonely*, *watchdog*, and *zany*. Obviously, Shakespeare loved words, and he knew many of them. While the average American today has a vocabulary of about 10,000 words, Shakespeare had a vocabulary of more than 29,000 words.

Shakespeare left London when he was about forty-seven and returned to Stratford to retire, although he worked on two more plays in his final years. He died on April 23, 1616, when he was fifty-two years old. (Some people believe he was also born on April 23.) He was buried in the same Stratford church in which he had been baptized. His tomb lies below the floor of the church, and a warning (possibly written by Shakespeare himself) is engraved on his tombstone:

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