

Shakespeare's Life and Career

I'd like to give you an introduction to Shakespeare's life and the contexts in which he wrote. But let me begin with a few comments about doing that:

- ❖ This is not the time or place for a full biography; I'm just trying to give you an overview so you can make some sense of him as a living, breathing human being rather than the icon ("the Bard"; "Shakespeare") that is so prevalent in our culture.
- ❖ Should I even do this? Critics in the middle of the 20th century derided biographical criticism as taking us away from the plays, the texts, and they provided a valuable service in reminding us to focus on the plays. You can get drawn away from what's important and wonderful—his plays, his words, his art—if you base everything on his biography. And frankly we know so little that sometimes biographical criticism can get into silly surmises and worse conspiracy theories. But I also believe that art is made by living, breathing human beings, who had fathers and mothers and friends and enemies and who had to pay the bills (or not!) and who lived in times of political turmoil and economic problems (what time isn't?) and that it might help us to get to know something about them as human beings. It helps me, at least.
- ❖ I take it as a beginning axiom that "Shakespeare," the author of plays we're doing to read, really was the William Shakespeare who grew up in Stratford-on-Avon. Some of you may know that for a long time there have been people who claim that Shakespeare wasn't Shakespeare, that various other people—Christopher Marlowe, the Earl of Oxford, etc.—wrote the plays. These people are known as "Anti-Stratfordians", and while I could debate their claims, I'm not going to do it here. If you like, we could have a lively debate about that once you arrive.

Okay, let's begin.

The Life

William Shakespeare was born, we think, on April 23rd, 1564, and died on the 23rd of April, 1616. But even here it's a bit, well, too neat unless it's just a grand coincidence. We think he was born on the 23rd because he was baptized on the 26th in the local Stratford parish—*that* event was duly recorded in the parish register—and babies at that time were often/usually baptized about three days after they were born. But April 23rd is the Feast of St. George, the patron saint of England, and it almost seems too good to be true that England's greatest writer would be born that day. We know he dies on his birthday—if it was his birthday—because those things were carefully recorded.

So Shakespeare's two years younger than I am. (Huh, you say? Well, I was born in 1962—which means I'm about to turn 52—and Shakespeare was born in '64. I use this as a method to help me understand historical periods other than my own. It helps me get a sense of the span of time, put events in order. Try it.) If we think of this as 1614, rather than 2014, we see Shakespeare as a middle-aged man (but later middle age, given life spans then). He's written almost all of his greatest plays. He has retired to Stratford, but may still be doing some work with plays, either co-writing or helping other, younger playwrights. But he won't enjoy a long retirement; he will be dead in two years.

His mother, Mary Arden, was the daughter of a substantial landowner, with one of the finest houses and lots of land (including the Forest of Arden?) just outside of town. His father was a “glover”—it meant a dealer in hides and leather goods, possibly a tanner and one who made these things into end products—so a businessman of that prosperous merchant class in this market town where people came to trade, to buy and sell. He was a member of the Stratford city council, and served the city in various roles: a constable, one of the two town chamberlains; in 1565, when William was one year old, he was an alderman, and became high bailiff, sort of like a mayor, in 1568. But by 1577, when William was about 12, he drops out of the town records, most think because he must have suffered financial misfortunes. Some scholars have wondered whether the Arden (and possibly Shakespeare) families’ religious backgrounds may have had something to do with this. The Ardens had been, at least in the past, Catholic, and in an age of religious persecution, some have speculated that his father’s connections may have brought him down. But we just don’t know.

William attended the local Stratford grammar school. After his death, in a poem lauding him, Ben Jonson said Shakespeare had “little Latin and less Greek.” But Jonson was one of the greatest classical linguists of his age, so anyone compared to him might have seemed that way. We know that the Stratford school was a good one, run by a well-respected Oxford graduate as its main teacher, and any grammar school at the time would have taught by our standards today enormous amounts of Latin and yes, some Greek as well. The amount of the Latin poets and authors Shakespeare would have learned—and which shows up in his plays—would easily fill two fat volumes today.

The next we hear of Shakespeare, he is marrying Anne Hathaway in 1582. She’s from a well-to-do Stratford family. But she’s 27, and surely was, or was nearing, old-maid status at the time, and Shakespeare was only 18. They marry in November, and a daughter, Susanna, is born in May 1583. You do the math—there’s not nine months in between, are there? So either William got Anne pregnant, then they hurried a wedding, or Anne was pregnant by someone else and William stepped in to save her honor, or they had an earlier “troth plight” (see *Measure for Measure*) that would have rendered this okay. We just don’t know. But eighteen year old guys, then as now, don’t often marry twenty-seven year old women. They later had twins, Judith and Hamnet (interesting name, eh?), in 1585.

For the next seven years there is a gap in official records—we see nothing of Shakespeare, and believe me, scholars have looked. From early after his death, people have jumped in to fill in this gap with surmises and legends—that he taught school, that he poached a deer on royal lands and got arrested, that he ran off with one of the theatre companies that regularly came through Stratford. We just don’t know, and probably never will. Dr. Moran will tell you about a German scholar’s theory that he was in Rome, but even that is contested. Hotly.

The next we hear of him, in 1592, it is in a hostile comment by Richard Greene, a playwright in London. He’s lamenting all these new, cocky, hot playwrights, and singles out one “upstart crow”, a “Shakes-scene,” and even refers clearly to Shakespeare’s early history plays. So it’s unmistakable—by this time Shakespeare is in London, writing plays, and has been around long enough to arouse the ire and jealousy of a now-forgotten competitor. He’s the

member of a company called The Chamberlain's Men, called this because their patron was the Lord Chamberlain. It was one of several such companies at the time, all competing for the entertainment dollar (or pence, I suppose). Shakespeare's company, during the '90s, became one of the top companies because of fine acting and because of his plays. (Ben Jonson's company was their only real rival.) By 1599 they moved their theatre from the north of London across the Thames River to the south banks, away from the Puritan city government's jurisdiction, and Shakespeare was a part-owner in the company. In 1596 he applied for a coat of arms not for himself but for his father—a nice gift to assuage his dad's feelings over the loss of his own fortune?—so he was becoming successful and known. In 1603, when James I comes to the throne, the Chamberlain's Men became the King's Men—that is, the King became their patron, anointing them with what by then was well-established, that they were the premier company putting on plays in London.

He retired back to Stratford, it would seem, in 1615 (remember, just a year from now), buying the second-largest house in town (and quite a large house it was); clearly he had succeeded economically and managed his money well, and was ready to relax and enjoy it. He didn't get to enjoy retirement long, however, for he died the next year. In his will, he leaves his 'second-best bed' to his wife, but we don't have to see any slight in this; probably the best bed in the house would have been for guests, so he was leaving Anne, in fact, their own marital bed.

Shakespeare as Actor and Writer

Take a look at a list of Shakespeare's plays in chronological order (most editions have this somewhere in the introductory notes or the appendices). Scholars quibble over the dating of some of these, but the basic outline of the career is pretty well known and agreed-upon by now. A couple of things always strike me when I do this:

- ❖ He's astoundingly productive, cranking out two and three plays a year. We think of "great art" as something that has to take long and painful effort, but Shakespeare had a company that needed fresh plays often, and he had to supply them. It's astonishing what he did, and wrote, all the while going to rehearsals, sitting in business and planning meetings, and more. If we think of the career as going from, say, 1595 to 1615, that's only twenty years, and we have 37 plays by Shakespeare in his career.
- ❖ He starts with histories and romantic comedies, which were popular at the time, it would seem. But around 1599 he shifts, and begins experimenting with his plays and his subject matter. *Julius Caesar* comes during the time of this shift—a leaner, less "pretty" play in its language, a more questioning political play. In the early 1600s he moves to the great period of the tragedies (*Othello*, *Lear*, *Macbeth*) and then ends his career turning to the Romances that employ a magical, baroque world and explore themes of art and representation. All the while he works on and tinkers with lyrics and sonnets.

Remember, then, that theatre—any theatre—is a business, and is collaborative. Shakespeare worked with his company in choosing subject matter for their next season's plays, in thinking through, in rehearsing and adapting plays during rehearsal. During rehearsals, actors suggested new ways of approaching things, and might have improvised parts. And yes, he was (at least partly, though clearly that's not all of it) in this for the money. You

might think of Elizabethan theatre as more like movies today than the theatre as we have it today. People make films today in huge collaborative efforts, with producers (the money men) having a say, but writers, directors, and actors—not to mention all the cinematographers and cameramen and everyone else—have a part in the decisions. There's a lot of money involved, and people do it to make money. But also to make art, to say something about politics and people's lives and cultural issues. Let's not be puritanical about separating art from commerce—it would seem that Shakespeare was driven to write his greatest work by these very pressures and demands and possibilities.

For there's another way that theatre at the time was like the movies today—it was the real popular art of the time. Everyone goes to the movies today, or rents them, or downloads them, as everyone went to the theatre in Shakespeare's day. So it gave him a platform (as it does a director today) to talk to this audience, engage them, get them to ask questions and think. And there was a range then, as there is now, of low-level popular simplistic junk all the way up to great art. The theatre on an afternoon (it had to be afternoon, because there was no lighting) would have had a cross-section of London society, from upper-class society ladies to rough-and-tumble types from this rather shady part of town full of bear-baiting and brothels.

About one part of that audience we've recently learned a good deal more. You may have heard of the “groundlings”—those who paid the least amount and stood on the open floor of the Globe. In the past it was assumed that these were low-class, uneducated types, drinking and swearing and tossing things at the actors. More recent scholarship, however, has uncovered that they were probably students from the Inns of the Court across the Thames—young guys studying to be lawyers. They were actually quite educated, and would have caught classical allusions, commercial terminology, and especially all the legal language Shakespeare often works into his plays. (But like rowdy students today, they probably did drink and swear and throw things at the actors.)

It was in responding to this mixed and complex audience—and in responding to other plays, other playwrights, classical texts, and contemporary issues—that Shakespeare hammered out an art that appealed not just to them, but to us today. In that same poem where he laments Shakespeare's “little Latin and less Greek,” Ben Jonson says that Shakespeare was “not of an age, but for all time.”