

"Perfectly Imperfect: The Shakespeare Story"

Few authors today write with such universal understanding that their works will be popular with all types of people, and so successfully that their work survives centuries. These authors possess qualities we can seldom identify in their lifetimes. Yet we do know this -- William Shakespeare was one of them.

William Shakespeare's parents were John Shakespeare and Mary Arden. John Shakespeare was born in 1529. His father was a small tenant farmer in Snitterfield, near Stratford-upon-Avon. He became a successful glover and trader, and owned civic office in Stratford. He was not born to the nobility, but he did have some authority in the town. In 1596 he was given by the College of Arms the right to a coat of arms and a crest. Doing that advanced his status to that of a country gentleman. He would belong to the upper class of rural society. That was the class just under the knights and the nobility to which the country gentleman could be promoted if he made money in trade or the law and had influence at court. His rise in authority began the year after he was married. He became constable of Stratford, in charge of keeping the town safe. From 1561 to 1565, he was Chamberlain, responsible for the oversight and maintenance of Corporation of Stratford property. In 1564, his name appeared on the list of Capital Burgesses. He was likely a member for a number of years, just without his name on the list. Capital Burgesses were the main English parliament representatives for towns or boroughs. Later on, he was bailiff of the town, and held many important positions throughout his life. William Shakespeare's mother, Mary Arden, was born to nobility, a wealthy family. She was the youngest daughter of Robert Arden, also a country gentleman, of Wilmcote. He left in his will to Mary the estate of Asbies in Wilmcote and six pounds, thirteen shillings, and sixpence. Within a year of her father's death, in 1557, Mary married John Shakespeare.

William Shakespeare was the third child, born after Joan and Margaret Shakespeare. Margaret died before William was born, and Joan died sometime before 1569. William was born in 1564. His exact birth date is not known, though it is known that he was baptized on April 26 in the Holy Trinity Church of Stratford. His birthday could have been any of the four or five days before that day. Traditionally, it has been said that he was born on the 23 of April, the same day of his death and St. George's Day, but this is more because of the coincidence than based on fact. Gilbert Shakespeare was born in 1566, Anne was born in 1571, Richard in 1574, and Edmund in 1580. This made William the eldest.

Little is known about William's childhood. He was educated for free at the local grammar school, and learned Latin and a little bit of Greek. His plays suggest that he did not enjoy school, and it seems that he did enjoy sports. Many different play companies came to Stratford to perform, and since John Shakespeare was in charge of the theater at some times, it is almost for sure that William saw many plays while he was growing up. This probably gave him the background that he needed for writing plays. His family was well off and he lived easily until he was fifteen. That year, his father began to lose authority and money. William enjoyed the outdoors as a teenager, and was known to go on long walks in the country. He met Anne Hathaway when he was seventeen, probably on one of those walks. She was the daughter of Richard Hathaway and lived at Hewland's Farm, now known as Anne Hathaway's Cottage. Anne was also about 8 years older than William, an unheard of thing in the English countryside. Yet they decided to be married soon afterwards, though William was a minor. They received their marriage license on November 27, 1582, soon after Anne's father died. Curiously, their first child was born only six months later!

Susanna Shakespeare was born in late May of 1583. Twins, a boy and a girl named Hamnet and Judith were born two years later. They were named after a couple who lived nearby. Hamnet was William's very good friend. The twins were conceived in 1584, obviously, so Shakespeare must have been in Stratford at the time. What happened to the next seven years? It is not known. Some think that he was drawn to London for riches or to seek his fortune. However, there is a different rumor. It

is said that Shakespeare was arrested for poaching deer in Charlcote Park, owned by Sir Thomas Lucy. As punishment, Shakespeare was whipped, and as revenge he composed a nasty poem about Lucy. This doubled the punishment, and caused Shakespeare to flee Stratford for London.

Some say that Shakespeare and his wife were estranged. My guess is that they were still friends, but did not have any sort of romantic relationship. My reasoning is that Shakespeare visited Anne at different times when the theaters in London were closed, and did not just leave her completely, and when he bought a new house, she moved there. Also, in his will, Shakespeare left Anne his second best bed with the furniture. No one knows for sure what is implied by the "second best bed" but another man in English history who wrote fondly of his wife left her the second best bed as well, and I translate that as being a good thing. Some say that they were not happy because all the other actors in that theater in London lived with their wives during the working season, but maybe Anne was content in Stratford with the children. It remains a mystery.

The most important part of Shakespeare's career was his years in London. No one is sure what he did until 1592, when a pamphlet stated that Shakespeare wrote Henry VI in that year. The pamphlet was written by Robert Greene, a writer for the combination of the Admiral's and Lord Strange's Men theater groups at the Rose Theater in London. We do not know the exact order in which the plays were written, but we do know the order of the types of plays. First Shakespeare wrote histories and comedies, including the three parts of Henry VI, The Comedy of Errors, and Titus Andronicus. Titus Andromecus was the first of his plays to appear in print, in 1594.

During the years Shakespeare wrote the early plays, he was an actor in a few different play groups. Two that are known are Sussex' Men and Pembroke's Men. The exact times that he was in the play groups are unknown, but in 1594 Shakespeare probably became an actor and playwright for the Lord Chamberlain's company, and stayed there for the rest of his years in London. This was believed to be the first play group that made him one of the partners, instead of giving him a lowly job like those he had in all the other play groups. It was probably because a fellow player recognized his great talent in writing. Shakespeare probably did not act in any plays after he joined Lord Chamberlain's company.

In 1596, while Shakespeare was in London, his son Hamnet died. A year later, Shakespeare bought New Place, an important house in Stratford, and Anne went to live there. A woman called The Dark Lady was referred to in some of Shakespeare's sonnets, which were probably written in the 1590's. Shakespeare obviously had an affair with her during that time period. She was said to have an ill complexion, and dark hair, and there is evidence that her father was Italian. The most probably candidate is Emilia Lanier, who was married to a musician in the royal court. When her husband was off on an expedition to the Azores with the Earl of Southampton, she was the mistress of Simon Forman, an astrologer, and wrote a book of poems about how much she hated men. This is good evidence that she was the Dark Lady because the Dark Lady was often referred to as an ugly, unfashionable whore, teased by many men. She was also said to be a mistress of a young actor in the King's Men, who was Shakespeare's friend.

His plays were printed without his name until he wrote Love's Labor's Lost in 1598. In that year, a man named Francis Meres published a book in which he listed 12 of Shakespeare's plays, and two of his poems, which tells us that they had been written by 1598. In 1598 a man named Francis Meres published a book with his opinions of plays, and listed twelve of Shakespeare's plays. That tells us that Shakespeare had at least that many written by 1598. In 1599 he became one of seven sharers of the Globe Theater. It was the biggest and the grandest playhouse in London at the time.

In 1603, James I took over the company, and it was renamed the King's Men. In the first ten years of the 17th century, Shakespeare wrote his greatest works. Included were Macbeth, Hamlet, and King Lear. It was those plays that probably caused the King's Men in the Globe Theater to be ranked first of all of the play groups in London. In 1609, the company bought a theater called the Blackfriars.

This would come to be the company's winter headquarters. The residents who lived around the new theater enjoyed old fashioned romance and historical plays, which influenced the company's plays. During these years, Shakespeare became rather wealthy and invested money in Stratford. He owned a number of businesses there and had shares in many as well. Shakespeare probably took many trips to Stratford in that time period to conduct business as well as to make plans for his retirement. He was reaching the middle of his life, and in his time, people did not often live to old age.

In about 1610 Shakespeare retired . Maybe he retired because of poor health, or maybe he was tired of the busy, fast life he had in London. Or possibly he had an urge to spend the last years of his life with his family, whom he had neglected for so many years. In 1613, he bought the former Blackfriars Monastery gate house. During that year, he began writing again. He wrote Henry VIII and some other less known plays with a man called John Fletcher who worked with the company. During the first performance of that play, two cannons were shot, which were stopped by paper or "dummy shot." The paper caught fire, and it spread to the thatch above, setting the Globe Theater on fire. No one was hurt, but the theater burnt down, and that ended Shakespeare's career on a bad note. He did not invest in the new Globe Theater being built, and he went back to Stratford.

Shakespeare's first daughter, Susanna, was already married to John Hall, and in February of 1616, his daughter Judith married Thomas Quiney. It seems that once his two daughters were settled, Shakespeare's life began to wane. On March 25, 1616, he signed his will. He was believed to have fallen deathly ill around the time that the will was written. In his will he left his property to Susanna, a large sum of money to Judith, money as well to many of his friends from London, and he left his wife the second-best bed. Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616, and was buried two days later. He was buried under the floor in the Holy Trinity Church of Stratford. Shakespeare's tombstone says the following:

Good friend for Jesus sake forebeare

To dig the dust enclosed here!

Blest be the man that spares these stone

And curst be he that moves my bones.

The author of these lines is said to be Shakespeare himself. They mean to scare off anyone who wants to dig up his grave.

Shakespeare wrote a total of 36 plays in his lifetime. The following is a list of the plays:

A Midsummer Night's Dream

All's Well that Ends Well

Antony and Cleopatra

As You Like It

Coriolanus

Cymbeline

Hamlet the Prince of Denmark

Henry IV (two parts)

Henry V

Henry VI (three parts)

Henry VIII

Julius Caesar

King John

King Lear

Love's Labors Lost

Macbeth

Measure for Measure

Much Ado about Nothing

Othello

Pericles

Richard I

Richard II

Richard III

Romeo and Juliet
The Comedy of Errors
The Merchant of Venice
The Merry Wives of Windsor
The Taming of the Shrew
The Tempest
The Winter's Tale
Timon of Athens
Titus Andronicus
Troilus and Cressida
Twelfth Night
Two Gentlemen of Verona
Venus and Adonis

The list of Shakespeare's plays is very long, and this has led some to believe that other authors wrote some or all of Shakespeare's plays. This is called the "authorship controversy." The people who believe that Shakespeare didn't write the plays think that the author was the Earl of Oxford. They claim that the portraits of Shakespeare the playwright do not look like those of William Shakespeare. Another belief is that the Earl of Oxford always drew a shaking spear as his signature, and that his nickname was Shake-Spear. All of the different spellings of Shakespeare are also their evidence. The majority of authorities believe that Shakespeare did write the plays, otherwise wouldn't it be widely known that Shakespeare was not really Shakespeare at all?

William Shakespeare was an educated genius, who spent his life doing what he loved. It is said that he wrote so fast, he never spelled anything correctly and didn't use punctuation. Maybe that is why his writing is so fresh, creative, and funny. He may not have been very interested in exact details in his plays, in perfection, but somehow that is what he has achieved. It is the lack of perfection that makes his works so understandable and universal, and that will continue to be true for as long as his plays are in print.

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