

topic

Q&As: the man and the myth

Here are **some frequently asked questions about Shakespeare**, the answers to which will help us to begin a study of his plays and poems.

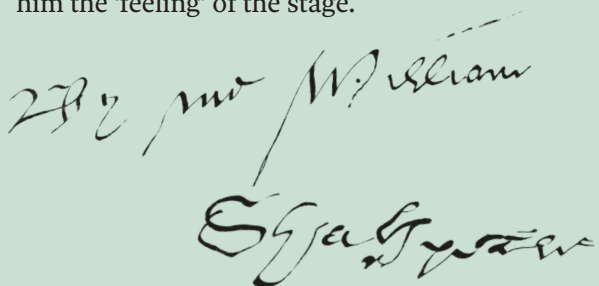
1 Was Shakespeare really Shakespeare? Yes, he was. There are too many mentions of his name and works by his contemporaries (including the *First Folio*) to doubt it seriously. There have, however, been claims that his plays were actually written by other people, for example the philosopher Francis Bacon (→ p. 106), Christopher Marlowe (→ p. 110), or the Earl of Oxford.

2 What kind of schooling did he have? He almost certainly attended Stratford's grammar school where from an early age he learned rhetoric, poetry, Latin and a bit of Greek – all of which clearly show in his plays and poems.

3 Did he only write plays? He mainly worked in the theatre writing plays, directing and acting in them too, but he also wrote poems (two narrative poems and a collection of sonnets) that were very famous in his time.

4 Did he bother to publish his plays? No, he didn't – as no playwright did at the time. Play scripts were used to stage the performance, but were not considered to be literature. The few plays which came out during his lifetime were the responsibility of printers who wanted to capitalize on the success of a given play.

5 Did he act in his own plays? Yes, he did, and not only when he was young. Apparently, he kept acting as late as 1608, when he was very famous and not too far from retirement. He acted in his own plays – according to tradition he played the Ghost in *Hamlet* – but also in other writers' plays. Acting was obviously important to him as it gave him the 'feeling' of the stage.



Handwritten signature of William Shakespeare.

6 Did he work with other writers? Yes, he did. Collaborating on a play was common practice among Elizabethan playwrights. As with today's films, TV series, soap operas, more than one writer would contribute to a script. Collaborating was not a sign of apprentice work, or not necessarily. In fact, several of Shakespeare's late plays (the romances and *Henry VIII*) were co-written with other writers.

7 Do all of his plays survive? At least two of Shakespeare's plays are lost: *Love's Labours Won*, a sequel to *Love's Labours Lost*, and *Cardenio*, a comedy based on Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. They are referred to in contemporary documents but have since disappeared. And, given the fact that plays were not printed as a rule, we cannot be sure that other works by Shakespeare might not have been lost.

8 Did he read/speak Italian? Despite legends that he travelled in Europe in his youth, no records survive. Yet his works clearly show a knowledge of French and Italian, beside Latin and Greek which he would have learnt at school. His knowledge of Italian and Italian things might have been more than basic since in his plays based on Italian *novellas* (*Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*) he clearly follows the Italian originals in some places.

9 Do any samples of his handwriting exist? Yes, his signature survives in a number of documents (including his last will) and it is believed that the hand which wrote a long speech in the tragedy *The Book of Sir Thomas More* (the manuscript is in the British Library) might well be Shakespeare's (the remaining parts of the play were written by at least five other writers).

1 WRITING Focus on one of the following aspects of Shakespeare's life:

- name and identity;
- schooling and education;
- literary production.

Write a short report about it based on the text you have just read.