



William Shakespeare

(1564–1616)

‘The Greatest Writer
in the English Language.’

Thousands of books have been written on Shakespeare and his plays and poems. Though they introduce us to his works and help us understand them, none can really tell us why he has become the world’s best-known writer. The following, however, are a few useful questions to bring us closer to Shakespeare’s world, his plays and his theatre.



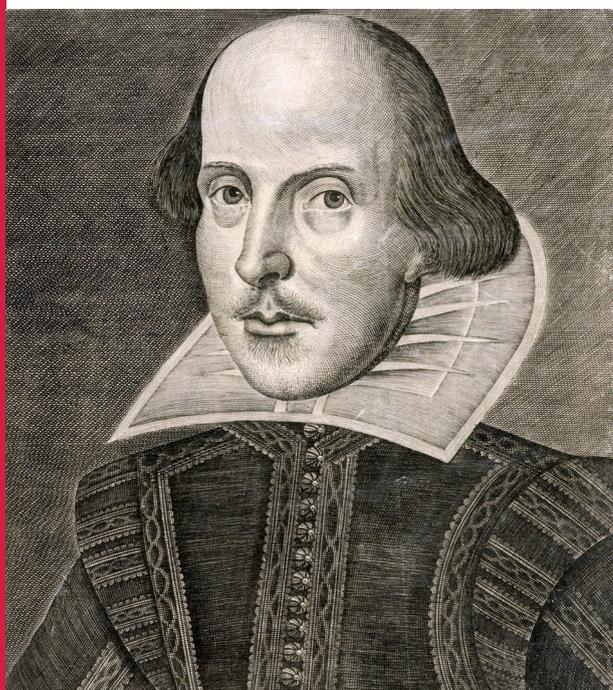
- Watch the **video lesson** and find out about William Shakespeare with the **author of your book**.
- **Listen** to the texts and **read** the extra texts.

Why is it different to study Shakespeare?

To study Shakespeare is **something different from studying any other writer in English** – or in any other language, in fact. Even people who have never studied or read him, or seen one of his plays, know of two young and unfortunate lovers called Romeo and Juliet, or of Othello, a jealous husband who kills his innocent wife. And if there are **words of poetry known all over the world** even by people who have had little schooling, they are ‘To be or not to be’. In the four centuries since his death Shakespeare has become **the world’s poet**, a status symbol for the world of entertainment, a cultural totem. His name and his works have been enlisted in countless political and social debates and, even more surprisingly, by both sides: the British and the American rebels in 1776; abolitionists of slavery and anti-abolitionists in the 19th century; the Allies and Nazi Germany in World War II. He is also a **familiar icon, known world-wide**.

What did Shakespeare look like?

The answer to this question will tell us a few interesting things about the writer and his fortune across the centuries.



THE ICON: *First Folio* engraving This is the **most famous likeness of Shakespeare**. It is an engraving, and it was first **printed on the title page of the first complete collection of his plays, the *First Folio*** (→ p. 120), published in 1623, only seven years after his death. The engraving was the work of a young artist of Flemish descent, Martin Droeshout. Its artistic quality has been much questioned, but since it was placed on the *First Folio* by Shakespeare’s colleagues it must be taken seriously. This is the image usually associated with Shakespeare and as such it has become an **icon endlessly reproduced on gadgets of various sorts**: mugs, teacups, computer mats and posters.

← Portrait from the *First Folio* edition of Shakespeare’s plays, 1623.



THE MAN OF THE THEATRE: *The Chandos Portrait* There is one thing that the *Folio* engraving fails to communicate, however, and that is the fire and passion that we feel in Shakespeare's plays and poems. In the *Folio* engraving he looks like a wealthy middle-aged gentleman of Stratford, but that is not the myth that has come down to us. Today, the portrait that most people like to think best conveys the image of Shakespeare the man of the theatre, **the romantic figure**, is the *Chandos Portrait* (c. 1610, so called because it was in the possession of the Chandos family). This is the

← *The Chandos Portrait*, c. 1610, attributed to John Taylor.

rakish poet, with open collar and earring, most of us like to imagine when thinking of Shakespeare. In the Victorian Age, when the portrait opened the National Portrait Gallery collection in 1856, some people thought that the Shakespeare depicted there looked too 'un-English' for his dark complexion and long untidy hair: too Italian or Jewish (Shakespeare in the role of Shylock, according to some).

↓ Joseph Fiennes as Shakespeare in *Shakespeare in Love* (1998).

THE BLOCKBUSTER SHAKESPEARE: *Shakespeare in Love* In our time, the best-known and best-loved image of Shakespeare comes not from books or paintings but from **the cinema**: the lovesick playwright desperately seeking inspiration in the blockbuster film *Shakespeare in Love* (1998, winner of 7 Academy Awards), played by actor Joseph Fiennes. It has been, and keeps being, reproduced on paper and on screen whenever Shakespeare is mentioned. This is hardly surprising: **the cinema is the art of the modern world** (it has been called the 'tenth Muse') and Shakespeare is the writer who has more Oscar awards to his name than any other in history.



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

William Shakespeare was both a **player**, that is, an actor, and a **playwright**, that is, a writer of **plays**. He lived most of his life in or around a **playhouse**, that is a theatre.

In Shakespeare's time people normally wrote and spoke of going to the playhouse, not to the theatre.

The English word 'play' comes from Old English *plega*. The term had the same meaning as the Latin *ludus* (game, entertainment), and it referred to a number of activities: plays (in the sense of dramatic performance), games, sports, contests of strength and ability such as wrestling and archery. The fact that in Shakespeare's time a theatre was called a playhouse was connected to these different meanings of the word 'play'.

The same London theatres where Shakespeare's and Marlowe's great tragedies were performed also showed combats between dogs and a bull or a bear ('bull-baiting' and 'bear-baiting'). Most theatres sold beer, oranges and peanuts, and some had rooms to rent. They were places of entertainment: multi-functional centres, we would call them today. This is why the term 'playhouse' was the most apt to indicate such buildings.

1 Make a list of all the Shakespeare plays you can remember. Which of them have you read, seen at the theatre, or watched in the form of film adaptations?

2 Answer the questions.

1 What makes Shakespeare stand out from all other English authors?

2 Where do we find the most famous portrait of

Shakespeare?

3 What kind of portrait is it?

4 How is the portrayal of the poet in the *Chandos Portrait* different?

5 How is Shakespeare presented in the film *Shakespeare in Love*?

The man and the playwright

Young Will in Stratford (1564–1585)

What was Shakespeare's upbringing and early life?

The most important documents regarding William Shakespeare's life refer to Stratford: his baptism, his marriage and the birth of his three children. **He was born on 23rd April 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon**, in Warwickshire. In fact, he was christened on 26th April but tradition has dated his birth back to the 23rd, thus making it coincide with the feast of St George, England's patron saint. His father John was a glover and a wool dealer who rose to prominence in civic life: at one time he was Bailiff of Stratford (mayor). His mother, Mary Arden, came from a country family of some importance. **Shakespeare was born in a plague year** (1564 recorded some 200 deaths, an estimated sixth of the town's population), and outbreaks of the plague would follow him throughout his life, also heavily conditioning his work in the theatre when the playhouses were closed.

In his youth Shakespeare **almost certainly attended Stratford's grammar school**.

He would have started at 6 or 7, as was the custom, and have been taught rhetoric, poetry, Latin and some Greek: the knowledge of these subjects which emerges from his plays is in fact of the kind that was then part of a grammar school's curriculum. In November 1582, when he was 18, **he married Anne Hathaway**, eight years older than him. At the time of the marriage she was already pregnant, and their first daughter, Susanna, was born in May 1583. In February 1585 two other children, the twins Judith and Hamnet, were born. (Hamnet, who had the same name as Shakespeare's most famous character, Hamlet – the two were variants –, would die at the age of 11, in 1596.) It was probably at this time that he decided **to go to London to work in the theatre**. In fact, from the birth of the twins in 1585 until 1592, when he is mentioned in a book by a fellow playwright, we have no record of Shakespeare's whereabouts. These are **the so-called 'lost years'**, which have been imaginatively filled with many suggestions: school master, lawyer's clerk, butcher, poacher, soldier, or the follower of a great lord on his Grand Tour, especially to Italy.

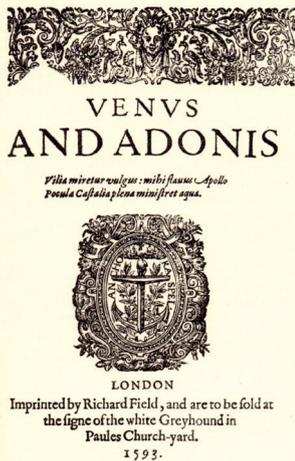
The free-lance playwright (1589–1594)

What did Shakespeare do when he entered the world of London theatres?

By 1592 Shakespeare was already active in London as **an actor and playwright**. We know that because in that year another writer, Robert Greene, jealous of his success in the theatre called him a 'Shake-Scene' (with an obvious pun on 'Shake-Speare'). Greene specifically referred to Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, a great success at the box office (that is, it made a lot of money). It was in three parts, each a separate play, as in today's film series. In those early years Shakespeare experimented with **two genres then popular**: the **light love comedy**, with *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and a **Roman tragedy full of blood and atrocities**, *Titus Andronicus* – what we would call pulp fiction today. He also tried his hand at a comedy of classical origin, *The Comedy of Errors* (c. 1592-93), imitated from the Latin playwright Plautus. Even in his apprentice days, though, Shakespeare was trying to outdo his models: the Latin original's comic plot turns on the mistaken identities of two identical twins; Shakespeare doubles it by



↑ Anne Hathaway's cottage.



↑ Title page of *Venus and Adonis* by William Shakespeare, 1593.

giving the two twins a servant each who in their turn are also identical twins. A new outbreak of the plague in 1592 closed down the theatres for about two years. In those two years away from the playhouse Shakespeare quickly **won himself a reputation as a poet** by two long mythological poems: *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594). They show his knowledge of classical themes and mythological figures and made him an acknowledged master of love poetry, especially among young readers. *Venus and Adonis* was a bestseller, running up to thirteen editions in the poet's lifetime. In 1594, however, **the plague died down and the playhouses reopened**: it was time for Will to go back to the theatre. Moreover, great changes among the companies of players were taking place, and Shakespeare would play his part in them.

The Lord Chamberlain's man (1594–1603)

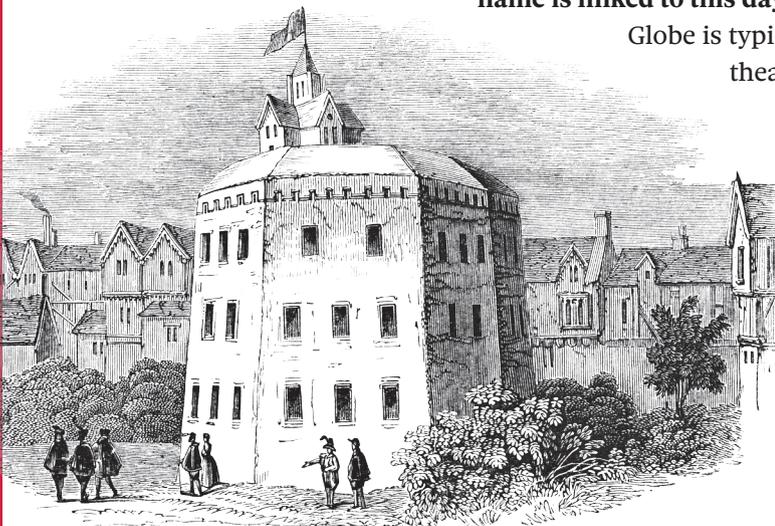
How did Shakespeare become a sharer in an important company of players?

In 1594 Lord Hunsdon, Queen Elizabeth's Lord Chamberlain (one of the three main officers of the Royal House), assembled a **new company of players: the Lord Chamberlain's Men**. Shakespeare was one of them; other members included the great comic actor William Kempe and the tragic one Richard Burbage – the first theatrical star as well as the first Romeo, Hamlet and Othello in history. The Chamberlain's Men played at the **Theatre in Shoreditch** (→ p. 104), north of London's city walls, or at Court during the Christmas festivities. Across the Thames, in Bankside, was the competition: the Rose Theatre where the Lord Admiral's Men played, whose main actor was Ned Alleyn and whose main dramatist had been Christopher Marlowe (→ p. 110). **Shakespeare was a great asset to the company**, bringing to them his old plays and the two new ones which he now wrote every year, on average. In their turn, they gave him a **permanent home and financial independence** especially after he **became a 'sharer' of the company** (he would get a tenth of the theatre's profits). This allowed him to buy **New Place, the second-best house in Stratford**, as well as some land and a coat of arms for his family.

Comparative wealth went hand in hand with **success on the theatrical scene**. Now that Marlowe was dead (he had died in 1593) **Shakespeare was the most successful playwright of his time**. He excelled in all the dramatic genres then in vogue: **comedies, tragedies and historical plays**. At the close of the century **the Chamberlain's Men moved into a new playhouse, the one to which Shakespeare's name is linked to this day: the Globe**. The story of their move to the

Globe is typical of the adventurous days of the Elizabethan theatre. In 1599 the lease of the Theatre playhouse expired, and despite several attempts by the Chamberlain's Men to renew it, the owner refused. Shakespeare and his fellow players then decided to dismantle the Theatre and to transport its parts to a new site across the river where they would be reassembled. This was accomplished overnight in December 1598 and the result was London's largest playhouse – the Globe. Apparently, all this was legal – but three years later the old owner was still trying to sue the company.

↓ The Theatre in the Shoreditch district of London. Vintage etching circa mid 19th century.



The King's man (1603–1616)

How did Shakespeare fare in the reign of King James I?

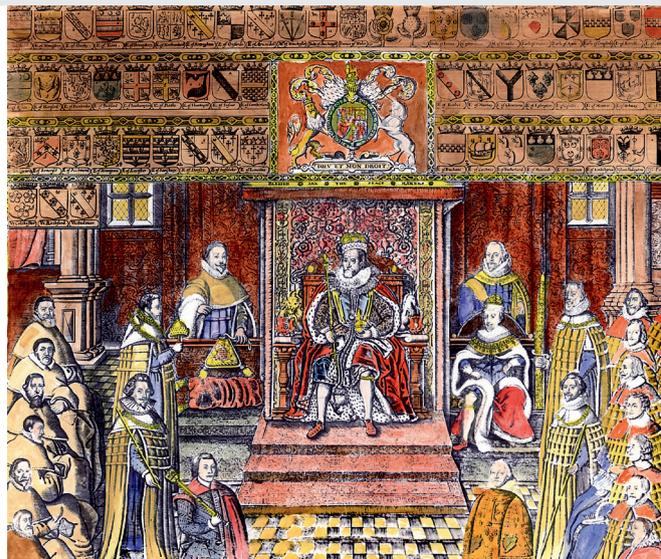
As **James I** succeeded Elizabeth at her death in 1603, Shakespeare's company's fortunes rose still higher. The **new king loved the theatre and wanted to take Shakespeare's company under his protection**: accordingly, they changed their name to **King's Men**. Shakespeare paid homage to James (who came from Scotland, where he still was King James VI) with a Scottish play, *Macbeth*, that celebrated one of James' mythical ancestors, Banquo. In the years 1603–1608 Shakespeare would write and stage many of his **most tragic stories, the so-called 'great tragedies'**: *Othello* (→ p. 144), *Macbeth* (→ p. 150), *King Lear* (→ p. 156), *Antony and Cleopatra*. They are very powerful stories and present a dark vision of life. Even the comedies of this period, *Troilus and Cressida* and *All's Well That Ends Well*, have an uncertain and bitter tone – they are often referred to as 'problem plays': their happy ending is a dubious one.

In this period the Globe, an open-air public theatre, was used in summer while in winter the company acted in the private, indoor Blackfriars Theatre. Though much smaller, the private theatres catered for more select audiences and brought in as much, if not more, money than the larger outdoor playhouses. At about this time, in **1609**, Shakespeare finally published his **collection of sonnets**, probably during one of the many lockdowns of the playhouses because of the plague.

Did he end his days in London?

The last part of Shakespeare's career is in some ways surprising: **he abandoned tragic subjects and only wrote comedies** (apart from one more history play, *Henry VIII*, and one more Roman play, *Coriolanus*). They are different from those of his early and middle years. The most typical and most famous is *The Tempest* (1611, → p. 173), a story set in a magic island ruled by Prospero, a magician and a savant. Prospero's farewell to his magic art in the play has been seen as Shakespeare's own farewell to the stage. In fact, he went on to write other comedies – or romances as these of his last phase are called – among which some that are still popular today such as *The Winter's Tale*. *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (written together with John Fletcher) was certainly Shakespeare's last play. It is dated 1613.

In June of that year the Globe was burned down by a fire, brought about by a cannon shot that set the thatched roof ablaze during a performance of *Henry VIII*. It is tempting to think that soon after Shakespeare decided to retire: by that time he was fifty, nearly all his relatives had died, and thanks to his success as a playwright he had earned enough to be able to **retire to Stratford** and buy several properties there. **He died in Stratford in 1616**, on the 23rd of April, **the same day on which he was born**. He was buried in the Holy Trinity Church where he had been christened.



↑ *King James I of England at Court*, coloured engraving by English School, 17th century.

1 Answer the questions.

- 1 What do we know about Shakespeare's family background and education?
- 2 Who was Anne Hathaway?
- 3 What are the 'lost years'?
- 4 What kind of works did Shakespeare write in his early days?

- 5 How did the plague affect the course of his career?
- 6 How did he become rich in the late 16th century and how did he invest his money?
- 7 What was Shakespeare's relationship with James I like?
- 8 What were the main developments in the last ten years of his career?