



## The Young Bard of Avon

William Shakespeare was an English playwright, poet, and actor during the Renaissance. Many people believe Shakespeare was the greatest playwright of all time. Shakespeare is sometimes called the “Bard of Avon.” *Bard* is another word for poet. This well-known poet was born in England, in Stratford-upon-Avon, in 1564 CE.

He was the third of eight children. His father worked as a leather merchant and glove maker. During Shakespeare’s early years, his father served as bailiff (something like an officer of the law) of their town and the family seemed pretty well-off.

In Shakespeare’s time, well-off boys attended school. Girls stayed home. Young Will probably spent long hours learning Latin, Greek, the Bible, and English history. It seems he didn’t enjoy school much: in one of his plays, he described “the whining schoolboy, with his satchel . . . creeping like a snail unwillingly to school.”

Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway. It's believed that Shakespeare met his wife near her family home. Today, many people visit this home now known as Anne Hathaway's Cottage.



By the time Shakespeare reached college age, his father had become so poor that he owed money, couldn't pay taxes, and didn't show his face in public for fear of being thrown in jail. It's likely that the Shakespeare family didn't have enough money to pay for a college education for William.

What did William do when he finished his schooling? No one knows for sure.

## The Lost Years

There's a lot about Shakespeare's life we don't know. No one even knows for sure the exact date of Shakespeare's birthday.

Most of the information we have about Shakespeare comes from the town's official records of baptisms, marriages, and deaths. We also know a little from what his friends wrote about him. Over the years, scholars have closely examined the available documents, as well as Shakespeare's own writings, to put together a picture of the playwright's life. Sometimes parts of the picture are missing, and then scholars have to use whatever evidence they have to make an informed guess.

We *do* know that 18-year-old William married 26-year-old Anne Hathaway in 1582 CE. Over the next few years, Anne gave birth to their daughter Susanna, followed by twins, a daughter named Judith and a son named Hamnet.

After the twins were born, Shakespeare did not **linger** very long in Stratford-upon-Avon. We're not certain why he left. Nor does anyone know what Shakespeare did during what are called "The Lost Years" from 1582 to 1592 CE.

We do know that by 1592 CE, Shakespeare had arrived in London and was establishing a reputation as a playwright, actor, and poet. Some of his more highly educated competitors said his plays were "**vulgar**." But the people loved his work, and the royalty also enjoyed them. His acting company frequently performed in the court of Queen Elizabeth and later for King James.



Elizabeth I, Queen of England



**Did you know that in Shakespeare's time, only men acted on stage? No women were allowed to be actors! The women's parts were played by young boys who still had high voices and no beards.**

## The Globe Theater

Many of Shakespeare's plays were performed in the Globe Theater, which was built in 1599 CE on the south bank of the Thames River in London. The Globe was a wooden, circular building with an open courtyard in the middle. The theater could hold up to 2,500 people. People who didn't have a lot of money could pay a penny to stand in the yard and watch the play; they were called the groundlings. Richer people could buy seats in the galleries, which were along three sides of the theater and were covered by a roof to protect the audience from the sun or a sudden rain. Performances were given only in daylight and only in good weather.

A performance at the Globe was different from most theaters today. Audiences could be rude and noisy. It was common for viewers to shout comments and throw objects on stage. There were no curtains on stage and hardly any scenery. Although the scenery was simple, costumes were often quite fancy.

In 1613 CE, a cannon fired as part of a performance of *Henry VIII* set fire to a **thatched** roof, and the theater burned to the ground. But if you visit London today, you can still see a Shakespeare play at the Globe—that is, at the *new* Globe Theater.

In the 1990s the theater was rebuilt very near its original location. Scholars and architects worked together closely to make the new Globe as much like the original as possible.

And so, as the Bard himself said, "All's well that ends well."

## Shakespeare's Words

These phrases and lines come from the pen of the man most people consider the greatest playwright of all time, William Shakespeare. Along with the Bible, the works of Shakespeare have had a greater influence on English language and literature than anything by any other writers.

Have you ever heard any of these expressions?

*Tongue-tied*

*As quiet as a lamb*

*Dead as a doornail*

*Seen better days*

*Eaten out of house  
and home*

Have you ever come across any of these famous lines?

*All's well that ends well.*

*A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!*

*If music be the food of love, play on.*

*Sweets to the sweet.*

*Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?*

*Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.*

*To be, or not to be: that is the question.*

*Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears.*

*All the world's a stage and all the men and women  
merely players.*

Shakespeare wrote many poems, but he is best known for writing plays. When Shakespeare wrote his plays, England was ruled by Queen Elizabeth I and later King James I. Elizabeth was a powerful and intelligent leader, and very popular with the English people. The arts thrived during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. She filled her court with poets, playwrights, and musicians.

If you haven't read one of Shakespeare's plays yet, you probably will soon!