

!

Shakespeare's life

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William Shakespeare ([National Portrait Gallery](#)), in the famous [Chandos portrait](#), artist and authenticity unconfirmed.

There are few facts known with certainty about [William Shakespeare's life](#). The best-documented facts are that Shakespeare was [baptised](#) in [Stratford-upon-Avon](#) in [Warwickshire, England](#), 26 April 1564, at age 18 married [Anne Hathaway](#), had three children, and died on 23 April 1616 at the age of 52. Shakespeare is one of the first playwrights known to have retired before he died.

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Early life

William Shakespeare ^[1] was born in [Stratford-upon-Avon](#), a small country town, the son of [John Shakespeare](#), a successful glover and alderman from [Snitterfield](#), and of [Mary Arden](#), a daughter of the [gentry](#). They lived on Henley Street, having married around 1557. The date of his birth is not known, but his baptismal record was dated 26 April 1564. This is the first official record of Shakespeare, as birth certificates were not issued in the time of [Queen Elizabeth](#). Because baptisms were normally performed within a few days of birth, a tradition arose that he was born on 23 April, but this has no historical basis. This date would provide a convenient symmetry because Shakespeare died on the same day in 1616. It is also the [Feast Day](#) of [Saint George](#), the [patron saint](#) of England, which might seem appropriate for [England](#)'s greatest playwright.

Shakespeare's parents had eight children: Joan (1558-1635), Margaret (1562-63), William, Gilbert (1566-1612), Joan (1569-1646), Anne (1571-79), Richard (1574-1613), and Edmund (1580-1607).^[2]



The house in Stratford known as 'Shakespeare's Birthplace (although this status is uncertain).

Shakespeare's father, prosperous at the time of William's birth, was prosecuted for participating in the [black market in wool](#), and later lost his position as an [alderman](#). Some evidence pointed to possible [Roman Catholic](#) sympathies on both sides of the family.^[3]

It is theorized that Shakespeare attended King Edward VI Grammar School in central Stratford.^[4] The King honored in the school's name (Edward VI) had nothing to do with the original founding of the school, which had Roman Catholic origins. It had been established in the early 15th century, far before Edward's time.^[5] While the quality of [Elizabethan era grammar schools](#) was uneven, the school probably would have provided an intensive education in [Latin grammar](#) and literature. As a part of this education, the students would likely have been exposed to Latin plays, in which students performed to better understand the language. One of Shakespeare's earliest plays, [The Comedy of Errors](#), bears similarity to Plautus *The Two Menaechmuses*, which could well have been performed at the school.^[6] It is presumed that the young Shakespeare attended this school,^[7] although his attendance cannot be confirmed because the school's records have not survived. This school, which made frequent use of [corporal punishment](#), was free to male children in Stratford dating from an endowment by a Catholic chaplain in 1482.^[8] There is no evidence that he received a university education.

On 29 November 1582, at [Temple Grafton](#), near Stratford, the 18 year old Shakespeare married [Anne Hathaway](#) who was 26. Two neighbours of Hathaway, Fulk Sandalls and John Richardson, posted bond that there were no impediments to the marriage. There appears to have been some haste in arranging the ceremony: Hathaway was three months pregnant.

On 26 May 1583, Shakespeare's first child, [Susanna](#), was baptised at Stratford. Twin children, a son, [Hamnet](#), and a daughter, [Judith](#), were baptised on 2 February 1585. Hamnet died in 1596, Susanna in 1649 and Judith in 1662.

After his marriage, Shakespeare left few traces in the historical record until he appeared on the [London](#) theatrical scene. Indeed, the period from 1585 (when his twin children were born) until 1592 (when Robert Greene called him an "upstart crow") is known as Shakespeare's "lost years" because no evidence has survived to show exactly where he was or why he left Stratford for London.^[9] A number of stories are given to account for his life during this time, including that Shakespeare got in trouble for [poaching deer](#), that he worked as a country school teacher, and that he minded the horses of theatre patrons in London. There is no direct evidence to support any of these stories and they all appeared to have started after Shakespeare's death.^[10]

The theory that Shakespeare acted as a schoolmaster in Lancashire was proposed by E. A. J. Honigmann in 1985, founded on evidence in the will of a member of the Hoghton family, referring to plays and play-clothes and asking his kinsman to take care of "...William Shakeshaft, now dwelling with me...".^[11] The asserted nexus was John Cottom, Shakespeare's reputed last schoolmaster, who was purported to have recommended the Bard.^{[12][13]} [Michael Wood](#) points out that [Thomas Savage](#), Shakespeare's trustee at the Globe some twenty years later, was related by marriage to a neighbour to whom the will was also addressed. He allows, however, that *Shakeshaft* was a common name in Lancashire at the time.^[14] [Ackroyd](#) adds that study of the marginal notes in the Hoghton family copy of [Edward Hall's](#) *Chronicles*, an important source for Shakespeare's early histories, shows that they were in "probability" in Shakespeare's writing.^[15]

London and theatrical career

By 1592, Shakespeare was a playwright in London; he had enough of a reputation for [Robert Greene](#) to denounce him as "an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde*, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you: and being an absolute Johannes [factotum](#), is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey." (The italicized line parodies the phrase, "Oh, tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide" which Shakespeare wrote in [Henry VI, part 3](#).)

A handwritten signature in cursive script, likely a reproduction of Shakespeare's signature, reading "By me William Shakespeare".



Shakespeare's signature, from his will

By late 1594, Shakespeare was an actor, writer and part-owner of a [playing company](#), known as the [Lord Chamberlain's Men](#) — like others of the period, the company took its name from its aristocratic sponsor, in this case the [Lord Chamberlain](#). The group became popular enough that after the death of [Elizabeth I](#) and the coronation of [James I](#) (1603), the new monarch adopted the company and it became known as the [King's Men](#). Shakespeare's writing shows him to indeed be an actor, with many phrases, words, and references to acting, but there isn't an academic approach to the art of theatre that might be expected. ^[16]



Shakespeare's Coat of Arms

Despite this lack of academia, Shakespeare long sought the status of a gentleman. His father John, a bailiff of Stratford with a wife of good birth, was eligible for a [coat of arms](#) and applied to the College of Heralds for one. But his worsening financial status prevented him from obtaining it. The application was successfully renewed in 1596, most probably at the instigation of William himself, as he was the more prosperous at the time. However as an actor he was not eligible and the application still relied on his father's qualifications. The motto on the coat of arms was "Non sanz droit", or "Not without right", showing a certain defensiveness and insecurity on the part of its author; most likely William. The theme of social status and restoration runs deep through the plots of many of his plays, and Shakespeare seems to mock his own longing. ^[17]



Nash's House, Stratford-on-Avon, standing adjacent to the site of [New Place](#), Shakespeare's home

By 1596, Shakespeare had moved to the parish of St. Helen's, [Bishopsgate](#), and by 1598 he appeared at the top of a list of actors in *Every Man in His Humour* written by [Ben Jonson](#). He is also listed among the actors in Jonson's *Sejanus: His Fall*. Also by 1598, his name began to appear on the title pages of his plays, presumably as a selling point.

There is a tradition that Shakespeare, in addition to writing many of the plays his company enacted, and being concerned as part-owner of the company with business and financial details, continued to act in various parts, such as the ghost of Hamlet's father, Adam in *As You Like It*, and the Chorus in *Henry V*.^[18]

He appears to have moved across the [River Thames](#) to [Southwark](#) sometime around 1599. In 1604, Shakespeare acted as a matchmaker for his landlord's daughter. Legal documents from 1612, when the case was brought to trial, show that in 1604, Shakespeare was a tenant of Christopher Mountjoy, a [Huguenot](#) tire-maker (a maker of ornamental headdresses) in the northwest of London. Mountjoy's apprentice Stephen Belott wanted to marry Mountjoy's daughter. Shakespeare was enlisted as a go-between, to help negotiate the details of the dowry. On Shakespeare's assurances, the couple married. Eight years later, Belott sued his father-in-law for delivering only part of the dowry. Shakespeare was called to testify, but remembered little of the circumstances. On this case see article '[Bellott v. Mountjoy](#)'.

Various documents recording legal affairs and commercial transactions show that Shakespeare grew rich enough during his stay in London years to buy a property in [Blackfriars, London](#) and own the second-largest house in Stratford, [New Place](#).

Later years



[Shakespeare's funerary monument](#)



Shakespeare's House in Stratford-upon-Avon. Now home of the [Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust](#)

Shakespeare appears to have retired to Stratford in 1613.

In the last few weeks of Shakespeare's life, the man who was to marry his younger daughter Judith — a tavern-keeper named Thomas Quiney — was charged in the local church court with "[fornication](#)." A woman named Margaret Wheeler had given birth to a child and claimed it was Quiney's; she and the child both died soon after. Quiney was thereafter disgraced, and Shakespeare revised his will to ensure that Judith's interest in his estate was protected from possible malfeasance on Quiney's part.

He died on 23 April 1616, at the age of 52. He was married to [Anne Hathaway](#) until his death and was survived by two daughters, Susanna and Judith. His son Hamnet had died in 1596. Susanna married [Dr John Hall](#), and his last surviving descendant was their daughter Elizabeth Hall. There are no direct descendants of the poet and playwright alive today, but the diarist [John Aubrey](#) recalls in his *Brief Lives* that Shakespeare was the real father of the poet [William Davenant](#), his godson. Davenant was brought up as the son of a [vintner](#) at the Crown Tavern in Oxford, on the road between London and Stratford, where Shakespeare would stay when travelling between his home and the capital.^[19]

Shakespeare is buried in the [chancel](#) of [Holy Trinity Church](#) in [Stratford-upon-Avon](#). He was granted the honour of burial in the chancel not on account of his fame as a playwright but for purchasing a share of the [tithes](#) of the church for £440 (a considerable sum of money at the time). A [monument](#) on the wall nearest his grave, probably placed by his family,^[20] features a [bust](#) showing Shakespeare posed in the act of writing. Each year on his claimed birthday, a new quill pen is placed in the writing hand of the bust. He is believed to have written the [epitaph](#) on his tombstone.^[21]

“

Good friend, for Jesus' sake forbear,

To dig the dust enclosed here.
Blest be the man that spares these stones,

”

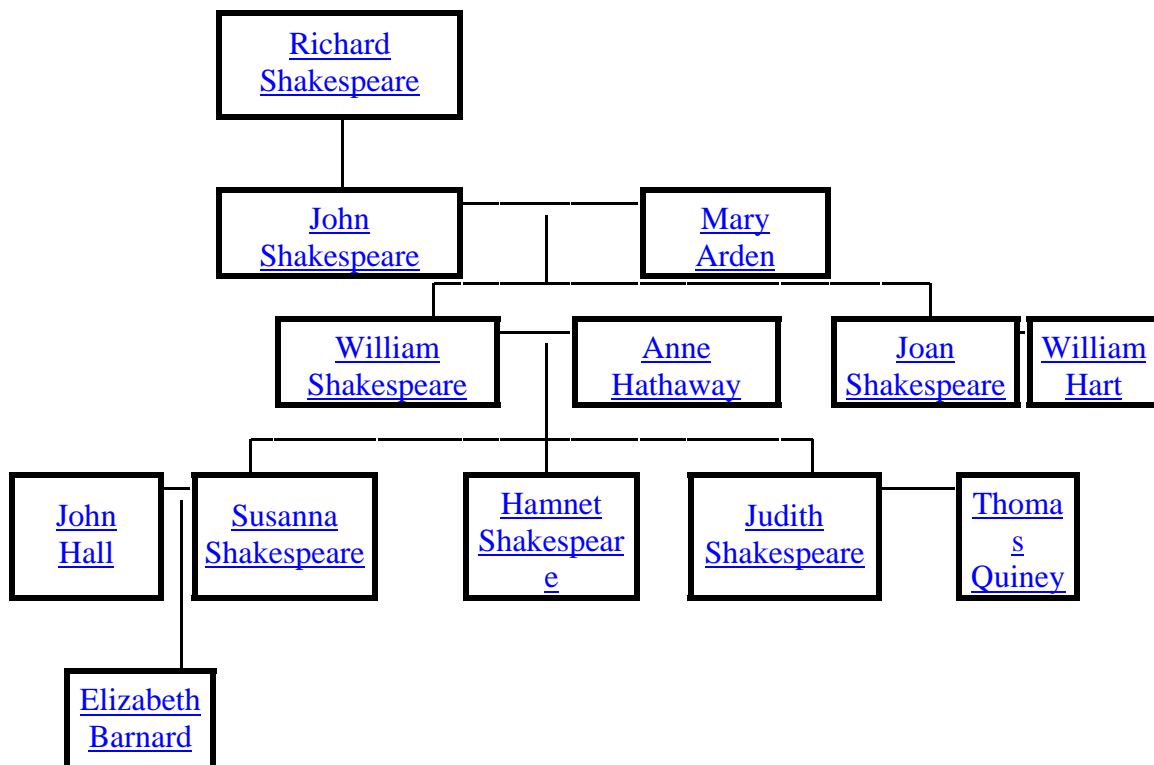
And cursed be he that moves my bones.

Authorship

Main article: [Shakespearean authorship question](#)

Around one hundred and fifty years after Shakespeare's death, doubts began to be expressed about the authorship of the plays and poetry attributed to him. Researchers who believe the works to have been written by another playwright, or group of playwrights, have since then proposed many candidates for alternative authorship, including [Francis Bacon](#),^[22] [Christopher Marlowe](#),^[23] and [Edward de Vere](#), the Earl of Oxford.^[24] While it is generally accepted in academic circles that Shakespeare's plays were written by Shakespeare of Stratford and not another author, popular interest in the subject, particularly the [Oxfordian theory](#),^{[25][26]} has continued into the 21st century.^[27]

[\[edit\]](#) Shakespeare's family tree



See also

- [William Shakespeare](#)
- [Elizabethan era](#)
- [Shakespeare's reputation](#)

- [Shakespeare's religion](#)
- [Shakespeare authorship question](#)
- [Sexuality of William Shakespeare](#)
- [Shakespeare's plays](#)
- [Shakespeare's sonnets](#)
- [Anne Hathaway \(Shakespeare\)](#)
- [Shakespeare's late romances](#)
- [Chronology of Shakespeare's plays](#)
- [Shakespeare's England](#)
- [Globe Theatre](#)
- [Shakespeare's Way](#)

References and notes

1. [^] also spelled Shakspeare, Shaksper and Shake-speare, as spelling in Elizabethan times was not fixed and absolute. See Greg, Walter Wilson, "Old Plays and New Editions," *The Library* NS 3 (1902): 417.
2. [^] [A Shakespeare Genealogy](#)
3. [^] For a more complete discussion of this see  "[The Religion of Shakespeare](#)". *Catholic Encyclopedia*. (1913). New York: Robert Appleton Company.
4. [^] 'Will in the World' by Stephen Greenblatt, Quebecor World, Fairfield; United States, 2004, p. 25
5. [^] 'Will in the World' by Stephen Greenblatt, Quebecor World, Fairfield; United States, 2004, p. 25
6. [^] 'Will in the World' by Stephen Greenblatt, Quebecor World, Fairfield; United States, 2004, pp. 27-8
7. [^] Honan, Park. *Shakespeare: A Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, 43.
8. [^] 'Will in the World' by Stephen Greenblatt, Quebecor World, Fairfield; United States, 2004, p. 25
9. [^] *Shakespeare: The Lost Years* by E. A. J. Honigmann, Manchester University Press; 2nd edition, 1999, page 1.
10. [^] "[The Lost Years.](#)" Shakespeare Time line, accessed 7 November 2006.
11. [^] "[The Lost Years.](#)" Shakespeare Timeline, accessed 7 November 2006.
12. [^] "[The Lost Years.](#)" Shakespeare Timeline, accessed 7 November 2006.
13. [^] [Murray, David Aaron In Search of Shakespeare Crisis Magazine](#)
14. [^] Michael Wood "In Search of Shakespeare" (2003) BBC Books, [ISBN 0-563-52141-4](#) p.80
15. [^] [Ackroyd, Peter](#) (2005). *Shakespeare the Biography*. London: Chatto and Windus, p 76. [ISBN 1-856-19726-3](#).
16. [^] *The Facts About Shakespeare* by William Allan Neilson and Ashley Horace Thorndike, 1913, The Macmillan Company
17. [^] 'Will in the World' by Stephen Greenblatt, Quebecor World, Fairfield, United States, 2004
18. [^] [Article on Shakespeare's Globe Theatre](#) Zee News on Shakespeare, accessed 23 January 2007.
19. [^] [Aubrey, John](#) (1680). "William Davenant, Knight", *Brief Lives*.
20. [^] *Cultural Shakespeare: Essays in the Shakespeare Myth* by Graham Holderness, Univ of Hertfordshire Press, 2001, pages 152-54.

21. [^] Dowdall, John (1693). *Traditional anecdotes of Shakespeare: Collected in Warwickshire, in the year MDCXCIII*, quoted in *William Shakespeare: A Documentary Life* by Schoenbaum, Simon (1975).
22. [^] *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespeare Unfolded* at [Project Gutenberg](#) by Delia Bacon, 1857.
23. [^] Hoffman, Calvin (1960). *The Murder of the Man who was Shakespeare*. Grosset & Dunlap.
24. [^] Ogburn, Charlton (1992). *The Mysterious William Shakespeare: The Myth and the Reality*, 2nd, EPM Publications.
25. [^] "Edward de Vere, 17th earl of Oxford". *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia*. Encyclopedia Britannica (2007). Retrieved on [2007-06-14](#).
26. [^] Michael Satchell (24 July 2000). "[Hunting for good Will: Will the real Shakespeare please stand up?](#)". *Mysteries of History*. US News. Retrieved on [2007-06-14](#).
27. [^] Dr. Michael Delahoyde. "[Oxford and Music](#)". Washington State University. Retrieved on [2007-06-14](#).

External links

- [The Shakespeare Birthplace trust](#) has an excellent discussion of Shakespeare's life on its website.
- [The Internet Shakespeare Editions](#) provides an extensive section on his life and times.
- [The Stratford Guide](#) A visitor Guide to Stratford Upon Avon. Has sections on Shakespeare's life, Attractions in Stratford and much more.
- [The Shakespeare Resource Center](#) A directory of Web resources for online Shakespearean study. Includes a Shakespeare biography, works timeline, play synopses, and language resources.
- [Shakespeare's family tree](#)
- [The Literature Network](#) discusses Shakespeare's biography, his plays, and the history of them. There are lists of all of his plays and the order in which they were written.
- [Encyclopedia Britannica's Guide to Shakespeare](#) A comprehensive resource that includes historical information and background on Shakespeare's plays and in depth literary critiques.
- [History World](#) This website provides a broad overview of the history of Europe. It provides insight into the time period in which Shakespeare was writing his plays.

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