



# William Shakespeare

(1564–1616)

SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS AND POETRY ARE REGARDED AS THE FINEST WORKS EVER WRITTEN IN ENGLISH.

*William Shakespeare is revered as England's greatest writer. Four centuries after his death, his plays are still read and performed every single day. Who was this remarkable author of so many masterpieces? In actual fact, we know very little about him.*

- 1 From Stratford to London** Shakespeare grew up in Stratford-upon-Avon, a busy market town on the Avon River about seventy-five miles northwest of London. Church and town records indicate that his mother, Mary Arden, was the daughter of a wealthy farmer who owned the land on which Shakespeare's grandfather lived. Shakespeare's father, John, was a prosperous merchant who also served for a time as Stratford's mayor. Shakespeare most likely went to the local grammar school, where he would have studied Latin and Greek as well as English and world history. He would eventually put all those lessons to use in plays about historical figures, such as Julius Caesar and King Henry IV.

In 1582, when he was eighteen, Shakespeare married a woman named Anne Hathaway and with her had three children, including a set of twins. The next decade of his life is shrouded in mystery, but by 1592 he had moved to London, where he gravitated to the theater. Starting off as an actor, he soon began writing plays as well. By 1594 he had become the principal playwright of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, the Burbages' acting company. Some of the early plays Shakespeare wrote at this time include the romantic comedy *The Taming of the Shrew* and the romantic tragedy *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*.

- 2** Shakespeare was not just a performer and a playwright, however; he was also part owner of the theater company. This meant that he earned money in three ways—from fees for his plays, from his acting salary, and from his share of the company's profits. Those profits rose substantially after the Lord Chamberlain's Men moved to the Globe Theatre, where as many as 3,000 people might attend a single performance. It was at the Globe that many of Shakespeare's later masterpieces premiered, probably beginning with *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* in 1599.



3) **3 The King's Players** In 1603 Queen Elizabeth I died, and her Scottish cousin took the throne as James I. Partial to the theater, James was particularly supportive of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which had emerged as one of the two best acting companies in the land. Not only did it have a brilliant playwright in William Shakespeare, but it also had a fine actor in Richard Burbage, who starred in most of Shakespeare's plays. In 1606, flattered by the king's patronage, the company changed its name to the King's Men. It is believed that Shakespeare wrote his great Scottish play, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, to appeal particularly to James I. Three years later, the King's Men began performing at the Blackfriars Theatre, using the Globe only in summer months. By utilizing this indoor theater in winter, the King's Men further increased profits. The company did so well that Shakespeare was soon able to retire. In 1610, he moved back to Stratford-upon-Avon, buying one of the finest homes in town. He died of unknown causes in 1616.

## 4 Shakespeare Says . . .

Shakespeare's impact on the English language has been enormous. Not only did he coin new words and new meanings for old words, but he also used many expressions that have become part of our everyday speech. Here are just a few examples:

Expression and Source	Meaning
Eat out of house and home ( <i>Henry VI, Part II</i> )	Eat so much that it makes the provider poor
For ever and a day ( <i>The Taming of the Shrew</i> )	Indefinitely; with no end in sight
Give the devil his due ( <i>Henry IV, Part I</i> )	Recognize an opponent's achievement
Greek to me ( <i>Julius Caesar</i> )	Completely unintelligible to me
Green-eyed monster ( <i>Othello</i> )	Jealousy
In a pickle ( <i>The Tempest</i> )	In trouble
In stitches ( <i>Twelfth Night</i> )	Laughing so hard it hurts
Lay it on with a trowel ( <i>As You Like It</i> )	Flatter excessively
Makes your hair stand on end ( <i>Hamlet</i> )	Really frightens you
The milk of human kindness ( <i>Macbeth</i> )	Compassion
A plague on both your houses ( <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> )	I'm fed up with both sides (in an argument)
Salad days ( <i>Anthony and Cleopatra</i> )	Green, or naive, youth
Star-crossed lovers ( <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> )	Ill-fated lovers
Wear your heart upon your sleeve ( <i>Othello</i> )	Show your love to all
Won't budge an inch ( <i>The Taming of the Shrew</i> )	Will not give in; stands firm