

William Shakespeare

How [William Shakespeare](#) [1] (1564-1616), son of a provincial glover, became the world's most famous literary icon, is a story that's been told many times. Our appetite for biographies of [Shakespeare](#) [2] is apparently insatiable: new lives of Shakespeare are always being written, as if we are still trying to find the key to understand the operation of his genius and the source of his literary immortality. This Great Writers theme focuses on the works themselves, with lectures, ebooks, and supporting material to find new angles and sources of critical analysis and enjoyment.

The biographical facts of Shakespeare's life can be easily recounted. He was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, a market town in the English midlands, in 1564: his father was a glover. We know little about his education but he almost certainly attended the town grammar school where he would have learned the standard Latin literary and rhetorical curriculum: we see some Elizabethan classroom staples in [The Merry Wives of Windsor](#) [3]. There is no record of Shakespeare having attended university. He married Anne Hathaway in 1582, and their daughter Susanna was born in 1583, followed by twins Hamnet and Judith in 1585.

By the early 1590s Shakespeare is in London working as a playwright and actor - the so-called 'lost years' of the late 1580s are a fertile ground for speculation that Shakespeare worked as a schoolmaster to a Catholic family in Lancashire, or that he traveled in Europe, but there is no evidence for these stories. Although the dating of Shakespeare's works is difficult to ascertain [[see timeline](#) [4]], his earliest plays seem to have been histories on the troubled reign of [Henry VI](#) [5], [Two Gentlemen of Verona](#) [6] and [Titus Andronicus](#) [7]. During a period when the theatres were closed due to plague in 1593-4 he wrote two Ovidian narrative poems 'The Rape of Lucrece' and 'Venus and Adonis' - the latter was probably his most famous work during his own lifetime, and reprinted 16 times before 1647 (his most popular plays were printed only half as frequently).

Shakespeare joined the newly formed acting company the Chamberlain's Men in 1594 as a shareholder and continued to write solely for this company - which became the King's Men in 1603 - for the rest of his working life. During the 1590s he concentrated on comedies such as [A Midsummer Night's Dream](#) [8] and [As You Like It](#) [9], and English histories of the reigns of Richards II and III and Henrys IV and V; in the 1600s on tragedies including Hamlet and [King Lear](#) [10], returning to a form of comedy in his final plays such as [The Tempest](#) [11] and [The Winter's Tale](#) [12]. Scholars are increasingly certain that he collaborated with other writers at different points during his career - including with Peele, Nashe, Middleton, Wilkins and Fletcher. He died in Stratford in 1616 and is buried in the church there, where a monument was erected in 1623, the same year as the first collected edition of his plays, known as the [First Folio](#) [13].

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Links

[1] <http://writersinspire.org/writers/william-shakespeare>

[2] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00547ct>

- [3] <http://writersinspire.org/content/lamentable-tragedy-titus-andronicus>; Titus Andronicus, where Ovid's Metamorphoses informs the bloody action, and in the comic Latin-learning scene in
- [4] <http://writersinspire.org/content/english-renaissance-timeline-some-historical-cultural-dates>
- [5] <http://writersinspire.org/content/first-part-henry-sixt>
- [6] <http://writersinspire.org/content/two-gentlemen-verona>
- [7] <http://writersinspire.org/content/lamentable-tragedy-titus-andronicus>
- [8] <http://writersinspire.org/content/midsommer-nights-dreame>
- [9] <http://writersinspire.org/content/you-it>
- [10] <http://writersinspire.org/content/tragedie-king-lear>
- [11] <http://writersinspire.org/content/tempest-0>
- [12] <http://writersinspire.org/content/winters-tale-0>
- [13] <http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/shakespeares-first-folio>