

SHAKESPEARE'S LIFE

This handout was prepared by Dr. William Tarvin, a retired professor of literature. Please visit my free website www.tarvinlit.com. Over 500 works of American and British literature are analyzed there for free.

Text: The Complete Works of Shakespeare, ed. David Bevington. 4th ed. Chicago: Longman, 1997.

I. STRATFORD-UPON-AVON

1. For his birth to his death, Shakespeare was associated with Stratford.
2. During Shakespeare's day, Stratford was a market town of around 1,500 people (today it has about 22,000), about 75 miles northwest of London.
3. It is located in Warwickshire, in Shakespeare's time an agricultural region which contained the shrinking Forest of Arden.
4. The River Avon was sluggish but clear-watered and spanned by an arched bridge.
5. Trinity Church—Stratford's only church, and thus Shakespeare's-- stood on the river's banks.

II. SHAKESPEARE'S ANCESTRY

1. The name Shakespeare is possibly from a French word "saquespee," meaning "to draw out the sword quickly." In England, it finally became "Shakespeare," obviously influenced by the military meaning of "one who shakes the spear."
2. Shakespeare's Grandfather was Richard Shakespeare, a farmer and tenant on the property of Robert Arden. He died in 1561, three years before Shakespeare's birth.
3. Shakespeare's Father was John Shakespeare. He married "the boss's daughter"--Robert Arden's daughter Mary. In 1552, he moved to Stratford, setting up residence and shop on Henley Street. He seems to have been a glover as well as a wholesale merchant. His business prospered. From his father, Shakespeare appears to have inherited his interest in practical affairs, his love of property, and his happy temperament.
4. Shakespeare's Mother was Mary Arden.
 - a. She was born into a family which could trace its ancestry in an unbroken line to Anglo-Saxon times, which only two other families in England could do.

b. She may have been Catholic, which could explain Shakespeare's refusal to ridicule Catholics in his plays.

c. From his mother, Shakespeare may have inherited his reverence for the past and for ancient traditions.

III. SHAKESPEARE'S BIRTH

1. Shakespeare was baptized in Trinity Church on April 26, 1564.

a. Since infants were usually baptized four-to-five days after their birth, this probably means Shakespeare was born on April 21 or 22.

b. However, traditionally April 23 is assigned as his birth date, since it is the day of St. George, England's patron saint, and coincidentally the day Shakespeare died.

2. He was christened *Gulielmus* (Latin for William) *filius* (son of) *Johannes* (John) Shakespeare.

3. Shakespeare was probably not born in the house listed as the Birthplace, since it did not become John Shakespeare's property until 1575. Instead, Shakespeare was likely born in the contiguous house now called the Museum, which John bought before his marriage and move to Stratford.

4. William was the oldest of the Shakespeare's six children.

IV. SHAKESPEARE'S YOUTH

1. Shakespeare probably spent much of his youth in the countryside which was only a five-minute walk from Henley Street.

2. There are no surviving records covering the period of Shakespeare's school years. However, he surely attended King Edward VI Grammar School of Stratford.

3. By this time, John Shakespeare had become a member of the town council, even serving as its mayor or presiding officer in 1568 and thus his children could attend the school without charge.

4. Stratford's grammar school was one of the best in England; since it paid its schoolmaster the best wages in England, it had a succession of able teachers. Prior to entrance to a grammar school, students were expected to know how to read and write.

5. Having mastered these, they would typically be admitted to a grammar school at 7. The study there would be initially in Latin, but in later grades some Greek instruction was provided.

6. Shakespeare probably attended Stratford's Grammar School for 6-7 years (to 1577 or 1578, when his father's financial problems began).

7. When Shakespeare was 14 (1577), his father's misfortunes began. Surviving records indicate his debts grew; he lost five farms inherited by his wife from her father; he was unable to attend church for fear he would be arrested for debt.

8. Finally he declared bankruptcy in 1586. His father's financial misfortunes probably prevented Shakespeare from going to a university.

V. SHAKESPEARE'S MARRIAGE

1. The Bishop's register of Worcester—a county next to Warwickshire—shows for Nov. 27, 1582, the issue of a bishop's license for marriage of Shakespeare to Agnes (or Anne) Hathaway, daughter of the recently deceased Richard Hathaway of the town of Shottery, a short distance from Stratford.

2. Shakespeare would have been 18 at the time, while Anne would have been 26.

3. They were granted permission to marry after only one reading of the banns (announcement in a church of a forthcoming marriage), instead of the usual three readings. Such exemptions were common during the times.

4. The actual record of the marriage in a parish register has not survived, but presumably they could have married shortly after obtaining the license. Tradition has it that they were married in Temple Grafton, where Anne had relatives.

5. The couple certainly had engaged in premarital intercourse since their first child Susanna was born in May 1583, only six months after the marriage. However, in Elizabethan times, the betrothal had the validity of marriage, and Shakespeare and Hathaway's engagement is mentioned in her father's will of 1581.

6. Two years later in 1585, twins Hamnet and Judith were born.

VI. THE DARK YEARS

1. From 1585 (the birth of the twins) to 1592 (from the age of 21 to 28), nothing is known of Shakespeare.

2. Some speculate he may have taught school or was an assistant to a teacher; others hold that he served an apprenticeship in the theater, perhaps joining a theatrical company passing through Stratford.

3. In 1585, Shakespeare, being 21, had come of age.

VII. EARLY YEARS IN LONDON (1592-1600)

1. The first record of Shakespeare being in London was the near-death writer Robert Greene's attack on Shakespeare in his *Groatsworth of Wit*, published in September 1592. (Note: A groatsworth is an old English coin worth four pennies).

2. Green's comments in the book indicate that Shakespeare had achieved considerable success as a playwright, arousing the less successful Greene's jealousy.

3. In the book, he refers to Shakespeare as "an upstart crow" and "the only Shake-scene in a country." Greene also burlesques a line from one of Shakespeare's early plays.

4. Obviously, Shakespeare or some of his friends protested about the attack. Since Green had passed away, the apology came from Greene's editor Henry Chettle, who retracts Greene's assertions and praises Shakespeare's character, professionalism, and acquaintances.

5. In the coming years, praise for Shakespeare as a playwright continued. For instance in 1598 the critic Francis Meres in his *Palladis Tamia* says Shakespeare is England's leading playwright not just in comedy but in tragedy. His success in the theater is attested to by the record that his play *Henry VI, Part One*, had been seen on the stage by 10,000 spectators in 1592.

6. When the plague closed the theaters in 1593-94, Shakespeare turned to poetry, writing *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*.

7. In his private life, Shakespeare was living in London, but his wife remained in Stratford. Tax returns show him living in Bishopsgate near the Theatre and late at Southward.

8. In 1596, he acquired for his father the right to bear arms, a signal of his establishment in the rank and title of gentleman.

9. Also in 1596, Shakespeare's son Hamnet, only 11, died.

10. Another sign of his success is that he was able to purchase one of the best houses in Stratford, New Place in 1597. This would remain in Shakespeare's family under the death of Shakespeare's granddaughter in 1670; only its foundation now remains.

11. In 1599, Shakespeare's theatrical company—of which Shakespeare was a major shareholder--built and moved into the Globe Theatre.

12. In London , a typical day for Shakespeare would be every afternoon except Sunday he would act in a play between 2 and 5. Rehearsal for plays was done in the morning hours. Thus this left only evening for Shakespeare to write.

VIII. SHAKESPEARE FROM 1600 UP TO HIS DEATH

1. Family changes occurred: In 1601, his father died. In 1607, his daughter Susanna married Dr. John Hall. In 1608, his mother died and his first grandchild Elizabeth, the daughter of Susanna, was born. She was to be the last of Shakespeare's descendents, dying in 1670.

2. From 1602-1607, Shakespeare continued to make extensive land purchase around Stratford.

3. Shakespeare probably reset up permanent residence in Stratford around 1610. In 1609, Shakespeare's cousin Thomas Green, who had been living with the Shakespeare women at New Place, said he could continue to live there for only one more year.

4. Records in Stratford from 1610 - 1614 show that Shakespeare was increasingly active in the town, being consulted on numerous civic improvements in Stratford.

5. And in 1612, when Shakespeare visited London, he is listed not as a Londoner but as a Stratford resident.

IX. SHAKESPEARE'S WILL AND DEATH

1. Shakespeare's will is dated Mar. 24, 1616. He was obviously ill at the time, handwriting experts have suggested.

2. Most of his wealth goes to Susanna Hall, a fair sum to his second daughter Judith, who had married Thomas Quiney in 1616.

3. Other bequest went to friends and relatives and members of his theatrical company.

4. His "second best bed" was left to his wife, her only mention in the will. However, according to Elizabethan law she automatically received 1/3 of the income of her husband's estate, so the reference to the bed was not meant to slight her.

5. Anne continued to live at New Place with the Halls until her death in 1623.

6. Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616 and was buried in Stratford's Trinity Church.

X. SHAKESPEARE'S FIRST FOLIO

1. During Shakespeare's life many of his plays were printed (most often without his permission) in small booklets called QUARTOS.
2. None of Shakespeare's manuscripts survive.
3. In 1623, two members of Shakespeare's company, John Heminges and Henry Condell, compiled and had printed a large-size (c. 13" x 8") edition containing 36 of Shakespeare's plays, called now the First Folio.
4. It serves as the standard text for Shakespeare's plays, although it did not include Pericles or The Two Noble Kinsmen, now attributed to Shakespeare.

XI. SHAKESPEARE'S THEATRICAL COMPANIES

1. Since acting was not regarded as a profession in Elizabethan times, theatrical companies had to have nobleman sponsor them. The company was allowed to use the noble's name in designating itself.
2. For many years Shakespeare's company was the Lord Chamberlain's (the King's Treasurer) Men before they received the King's patronage, becoming the King's (King James's) Men in 1603.

XII. SHAKESPEARE'S THEATER (THE GLOBE)

1. It was an octagonal building, each of the eight sides 36 feet in length.
2. The stage was 36 feet deep, 33 feet in height, and 56 feet wide.
3. The main part of the stage had no curtains and no lighting. Little scenery was used, although the actors wore elaborate costumes.
4. Women were not allowed to act, with female roles typically being taken by boys.
5. The Globe stage was partially covered by a wooden roof, called the Shadow, projecting from the bottom of the third level.
 - a. The stage also probably had at its rear a small inner stage, which might have been curtained off.
 - b. This inner stage was directly in front of the entrance to the unseen room where costume changes were made.
 - c. On the second level above the rear wall was a balcony, and at a level above that was the musicians' chamber and a turret room used to create sound effects, such as thunder.