

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was born and brought up in Stratford-upon-Avon. Few records of Shakespeare's private life survive and this has given rise to considerable speculation. At 18, he married Anne Hathaway, who was 26, and six months after the marriage Anne gave birth to a daughter, Susanna. Two years later they had twins Hamnet and Judith. Hamnet died at the age of 11. Scholars refer to the years between 1585 and 1592 as Shakespeare's "lost years". After 1592, he began a successful career in London as an actor and writer. From 1594, Shakespeare's plays were performed by only the Lord Chamberlain's Men, a company owned by a group of players, including Shakespeare, and became the leading playing company in London. After the death of Queen Elizabeth in 1603, the company was awarded a royal patent by the new king, James I, and changed its name to the King's Men.

In 1599, a partnership of company members built their own theatre on the south bank of the River Thames, which they called the Globe. In 1608, the partnership also took over the Blackfriars indoor theatre. The indoor setting, combined with the Jacobean fashion for lavishly staged masques, allowed Shakespeare to introduce more elaborate stage devices. These property purchases and investments also made him a wealthy man. Shakespeare retired to Stratford around 1613 at age 49, where he died three years later. His works about 38 plays 154 sonnets and two long narrative poems. Shakespeare produced most of his known work between 1589 and 1613. His early plays were comedies and histories. Then he wrote mainly tragedies, and his last phase, tragicomedies, also known as romances, and collaborated with other playwrights. His last three plays were collaborations, probably with John Fletcher who succeeded him as the house playwright for the King's Men

His plays were published in editions of varying quality and accuracy. Some of Shakespeare's plays were published in *quartos* (flimsy books made from four leaves – bifolia- of paper folded twice to make eight leaves) from 1594. Where several versions of a play survive, each differs from the other due to copying or printing errors, notes by actors and so on. In 1623, two friends and fellow actors of Shakespeare, published the First Folio (*A leaf or folio* consisted of two pages of text and/or images, front and back to form a book) a collected edition of his dramatic works that included all but two of the plays now recognised as Shakespeare's. The First Folio was prefaced with a poem by fellow dramatist Ben Jonson.

In 1593 and 1594, when the theatres were closed because of plague, Shakespeare published two narrative poems on erotic themes, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, dedicated them to the Earl of Southampton. Influenced by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the poems show the guilt and moral confusion that result from uncontrolled lust. Published in 1609, the *Sonnets* were the last of Shakespeare's non-dramatic works to be printed. Scholars are not certain when each of the 154 sonnets was composed. He seems to have planned two contrasting series: one about uncontrollable lust for a married woman of dark complexion (the "dark lady"), and one about conflicted love for a fair young man (the "fair youth"). The *Sonnets* are a profound meditation on the nature of love, sexual passion, procreation, death, and time. In the plays, Shakespeare's standard poetic form was blank verse, composed in iambic pentameter. In practice, this meant that his verse was usually unrhymed and consisted of ten syllables to a line, spoken with a stress on every second syllable. After *Hamlet*, Shakespeare varied his poetic style further in order to emphasize emotional passages with concentrated and rapid, less regular, and often twisted diction, adopting many techniques to achieve these effects which included run-on lines, irregular pauses and stops, and extreme variations in sentence structure and length.

Shakespeare was a respected playwright in his own day, but during the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 and the end of the 17th century, when classical ideas were in vogue, critics of the time rated Shakespeare below John Fletcher and Ben Jonson. His reputation rose to its present heights after the 19th-century, when his works were rediscovered in Romantic (Wordsworth & Coleridge, Keats and others) and Victorian and later criticism (Carlyle, Dickens, Tennyson, Hardy,). Nowadays they continue to be reinterpreted in very diverse cultural and political contexts throughout the world, for example in MIT project [Global Shakespeares](#).

The early plays were influenced by the works of other Elizabethan dramatists, especially Thomas Kyd and Christopher Marlowe and by the traditions of medieval drama, classical and Italianate comedies, containing tight double plots and precise comic sequences. Gradually, his characters became more complex, and he switched between comic and serious scenes, prose and poetry. The plots of Shakespeare's tragedies often hinge on fatal errors or flaws that overturn order and destroy the hero and those he loves. See [the Complete Works of William Shakespeare](#).