

Shakespeare the Man

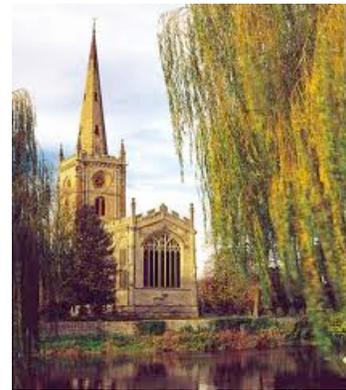
There will never be answers to the most interesting questions regarding Shakespeare's life. Were The Bard alive today, what would you ask him first? How do I get your vocabulary? Who was the inspiration for Hamlet? Where did you learn to write like that? The answers to these questions, however, are lost to antiquity and the only things we know now are a couple of jumbled cold hard facts. With these facts, however, and what we know about the culture of Elizabethan England, historians can make educated guesses about the answers to these questions and many more.

The Cold Hard Facts

We know more about Shakespeare than any other artist or, essentially, any other person living in Elizabethan England, with the exception of royal courtiers. The things that we know for sure about Shakespeare come primarily from little bits of bureaucratic paperwork; things like leases, announcements or birth, and wills. Listed here are most of the things we definitely know about Shakespeare. Imagine, what will remain for hundreds of years after you're gone?

April 26, 1564

Shakespeare was baptized on April 26, 1564 at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford upon Avon. He was born to John and Mary Shakespeare. The third of eight children, and the eldest of the five that survived to adulthood. Both of Shakespeare's parents were from farming families, though John had found success as a businessman making and selling leather goods. His success earned him a place on the town council.



Nov 28, 1582

Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway. At the time, he was 18 and she was 26; she was also pregnant.

May 26, 1583

The first child, Susanna, was christened

Feb 2, 1585

Anne and William christened their twins, Hamnet and Judith

1594

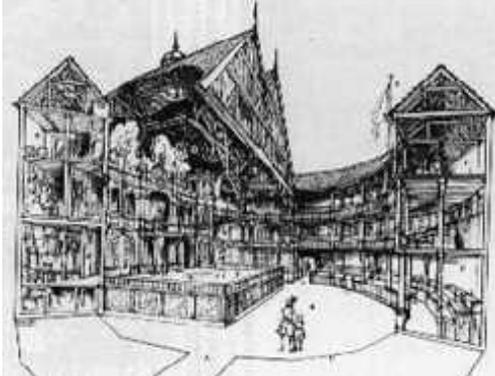
Shakespeare formed a theatre troupe called the Lord Chamberlain's Men

August, 1596

Hamnet dies at age 11

1597

Shakespeare purchased a large house, called New Place, in Stratford.



1599

Shakespeare became the partial owner of The Globe Theatre in London

Early 1616

Shakespeare wrote his will, leaving his wife his "second best bed," some money to his daughter Judith, most of the money and other items to Susanna and her husband, and small sums of money to three of his company's actors: Richard Burbage, John Heminge, and Henry Condell.

Apr 23, 1616

Shakespeare died and was buried near Holy Trinity Church.

Educated Guesses

That list was pretty dissatisfying, wasn't it? Sure, you now know that Shakespeare was a father, but you don't know how he felt about being a father. You know he married an older woman while she was pregnant but you don't know whether or not he was in love with her. Why did Anne Hathaway get the second best bed and not the best bed? Who got the best bed? Is it just coincidence that Shakespeare's most famous character in his most famous play is just one tiny letter away from sharing the name of his dead son? Historians have guessed many things about Shakespeare's life but it often seems that they're letting a lovely story sweep them away rather than finding any definitive answers.

For example, Shakespeare was baptized on April 26th and he died on April 23rd. At that time, it was common to baptize a child anywhere from a day to a week after its birth. Thus, it would have been plausible for Shakespeare to have been born on the same day he died. While he is equally likely to have been born anytime from the 19th-22nd, the special poetry of having Shakespeare's life come full circle is so appealing to people that most historians list the 23rd as Shakespeare's birthday. Which would you choose? Would you say that Shakespeare was born on the 23rd, just list the date of his christening, or give a range of answers when asked what day Shakespeare was born? Even the simplest accepted facts, like how to spell the name "Shakespeare", are as much a guess on the part of modern day scholars as they are truth. Shakespeare himself never spelled his name the way we do today, spelling it in many other (sometimes bizarre) ways such as *Shakesspere*, *Shakysper*, *Shaxpeer*, *Schakespeire*, *Shackper*, *Shexpere*, *Shaxkspere*, and *Shakspeyre*.

There are many commonly held beliefs about Shakespeare's life that seem to go beyond mere guessing and have credit as probable truth. These guesses stem from either the list of facts presented above, his works, what we know about the times he lived in, or a combination of all those sources. One of the most often guessed at facets of Shakespeare's life was his education. Most people believe that Shakespeare attended a "petty" school from the age of 4 or 5 until the age of 7, when he would have moved to his local grammar school, the King Edward VI Grammar School. At "petty" school, he would have learned his alphabet and how to read, write, and do some simple math. In grammar school, he would have learned Latin and some Greek. There he would have read works of Ovid, Plutarch, and many others. Were Shakespeare to have gone to university, it's likely historians would have found it written down somewhere; as they haven't, it's suspected he dropped out of grammar school, most likely at the age of 14, during a time in which his father was having financial difficulties.

We don't know a lot about who Shakespeare was as a man but we still have his works. Thirty-seven plays and one-hundred and fifty-four sonnets live to tell us who he was when he was alive. While it's natural to be curious about what he was like, the perhaps more interesting question is how much it matters. It seems that a lot of our questions regarding Shakespeare are questions about how to become a great artist or a great scholar. Even if Shakespeare were able to answer every question we could ask of him, he would never be able to tell us the secret to his greatness. Greatness can't be found in a sound bite, no matter who said it; it's gained through hard work, perseverance, and luck. So, we don't know a lot about Shakespeare, who cares! We can still enjoy his plays every bit as much as we would if we knew the man himself.

Bibliography

Schumaker, Allison. *Shaking Hands with Shakespeare*. Kaplan Publishing, 2004.

Bryson, Bill. *Shakespeare: The World as Stage*. Harper Collins, 2007.

Johnson, Mary. "Shakespeare's Life." Royal Shakespeare Company. 2012. <http://www.rsc.org.uk/education/resources/social-historical-context/life-and-times.aspx>.