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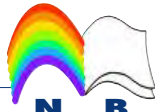
# The Swan On The Avon

The Life and Times of William Shakespeare

Annabel Pope



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# William Shakespeare



*“All the world’s a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts...”*

(*As You Like It*, Act II, Sc. VII)

Who was William Shakespeare? Was that really his name? Did he live in Stratford-Upon-Avon? Did he write all the plays himself? Was he English? Was he Italian? Did he really exist?

It is not easy to answer these questions, because William Shakespeare is an enigma. His story could even be called one of the biggest “cover-up jobs<sup>1</sup>” in history!

We know he was baptized on April 26<sup>th</sup>, 1564, because his baptism was registered, and his birthday is traditionally said to be on 23<sup>rd</sup> April.

His father was John Shakespeare, a glove-maker, and a well-liked and respected citizen of Stratford. He almost became mayor of the town, but in the 1570’s he got into serious financial trouble which changed the family’s life.

His mother was Mary Arden, the daughter of a farmer. She was related to the Arden family, who were later involved in a Catholic plot<sup>2</sup> against Queen Elizabeth in 1583. She had eight children, but her first two daughters, both died as babies. William was the third child, and he was followed by Gilbert, Joan (she lived the longest and died at 77), Anne, Richard and Edmund. The family lived in Henley Street over his father’s workshop.

William probably went to the local school, King’s New School, in Chapel Lane, which was open to all boys from the

1. *cover-up job*: a plan to prevent something from becoming public.      2. *plot*: a secret plan.



*The birthplace of William Shakespeare.*

age of seven, as long as they could read and write. He left school early, and never went to university.

In 1582, in Worcester, a town not far from Stratford, William Shakespeare asked for a marriage licence. His future wife was Anne Hathaway, a farmer's daughter from the nearby village of Shottery. He was eighteen at the time, and she was twenty-six. She was certainly already expecting a baby, because in May 1583, they had a daughter, Susanna, who was baptized in Holy Trinity Church. She was followed by the twins, Hamnet and Judith, who were born and baptized in February 1585. Their marriage lasted until Shakespeare's death, and we know that he sent money back to Stratford regularly.

At some point during the late 1580's, Shakespeare went to London. In 1592, Robert Greene, another playwright<sup>3</sup> and poet, wrote in a pamphlet<sup>4</sup>:

*"There is a presumptuous, clever young writer and actor who thinks he is as good as better-educated playwrights. He is a 'jack-of-all-trades'<sup>5</sup>, the only Shake-scene in the country."*

3. *playwright*: a person who writes plays.  
4. *pamphlet*: a short piece of writing.

5. *jack-of-all-trades*: a person who can do lots of different things.

From this we know that William was already known and working and living in London.

One of his earliest plays was *Henry VI*, which was performed in 1592. By the time he wrote his last one in 1613, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (which he wrote with John Fletcher), he had written at least 36 plays, 154 sonnets and 6 long poems.

We know from old documents that he was living in Bishopsgate, London, in 1593. There was an outbreak<sup>6</sup> of the plague<sup>7</sup> at this time, and all the theatres were closed down. This is perhaps why William decided to write the long, narrative poem, *Venus and Adonis*, the only work he ever had published himself, and which was very successful.

When the theatres were re-opened, the company of actors known as ‘The Chamberlain’s Men’ was formed. William was a member and in the beginning they performed at ‘The Theatre’. It was managed by James Burbage, whose son Richard became William’s friend and colleague and the first great Shakespearean actor.

In 1596, Shakespeare’s son, Hamnet, died at the age of only eleven and was buried in Stratford. Later that year, he asked the authorities for a coat of arms<sup>8</sup> for his family, and he was given one. The family chose the motto “Non Sanz Droict” (Not Without Right). The following year, 1597, he bought New Place, a large, old house in Stratford.

When the new Globe Theatre was opened across the river in Bankside, Shakespeare moved there too. This was the height of his career, when he produced all his great works.

Queen Elizabeth died in 1603 at the age of sixty-nine, and James I came to the throne. He loved the theatre, and very quickly adopted the Globe’s Company, who then changed their name to “The King’s Men”. In the next thirteen years, he watched more than a hundred performances of plays, including *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Coriolanus*.



6. *outbreak*: explosion.

7. *plague*: pestilence.

8. *coat of arms*: symbol of a family.

In 1604, Shakespeare moved to a completely different part of London, to Silver Street near Cripplegate, where he lived with a French family, the Mountjoys.

His father had died in 1601, followed by his mother and youngest brother Edmund in 1608. Edmund had followed William to London and become an actor too. He was buried in Southwark, near the Globe Theatre.

Shakespeare's *Sonnets* were published in 1609. There are one hundred and fifty four of them and they are often considered his greatest work.

Monday May 12<sup>th</sup> 1612 is the one day when we know exactly where he was: he was at the Court<sup>9</sup> of Requests, as a witness<sup>10</sup> in the Mountjoy-Bellott case. William's ex-landlord<sup>11</sup> from Silver Street was being sued<sup>12</sup> by his son-in-law, and Shakespeare left one of his six remaining signatures here, written on the court document.

*The Tempest*, performed in 1610, is traditionally said to be one of his last plays. In actual fact, his final works were probably *Cardenio* (the manuscript of this was lost) and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, performed in 1612 and 1613.

In the same year, he bought an old house in Blackfriars, but a few months later there was a disaster when the Globe Theatre was burnt down. It was re-built by 1614, but he 'retired' to Stratford where he died at his family home on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1616, at the age of fifty-two. He was buried in Holy Trinity Church, where the words he wrote for his own tomb, asking for his mortal remains to be left undisturbed, can still be read.

His old friends John Hemminges and Henry Condell published the first ever volume of his complete works in 1623, known as "The First Folio".



Shakespeare's bust in Holy Trinity Church in Stratford.

9. *court*: the place where legal trials take place and where crimes are judged.
10. *witness*: a person who knows the facts about something.
11. *landlord*: proprietor of a house.
12. *sue*: to take legal action against a person or organization, especially by making a legal claim for money.



# SHAKESPEARE'S LIFE AND TIMES (1)

## WORLD HISTORY

- 1565** The pencil was invented.  
The Spanish founded Rio de Janeiro.
- 1570** The first Atlas with seventy maps was published.
- 1571** The European Holy League (Venice, Spain and the Papacy), commanded by Don John of Austria, defeated the Turks at the Battle of Lepanto.
- 1572** The Saint Bartholomew Day Massacre took place in Paris, where hundreds of Protestants were killed by Catholics.
- 1574** The Holy War began in France against the Huguenots, who were Protestant followers of Calvin.  
Cosimo de Medici died.

## ENGLISH HISTORY

- 1564** Queen Elizabeth I had been on the throne for six years and was thirty-one years old. She was the daughter of Anne Boleyn and Henry VIII. Her father's divorce from Catharine of Aragon caused the schism with the Pope and the Catholic Church. Elizabeth, however, was quite tolerant of all religions, as long as people attended the official Protestant services.
- 1567** The very first theatre in London, The Red Lion, was built in Whitechapel.
- 1569** The first recorded lottery took place in England.
- 1570** England invaded Scotland.
- 1571** Pope Pious V excommunicated Elizabeth and declared her illegitimate because her father had divorced. Her spies were everywhere, especially in Warwickshire, where there were many Catholic sympathizers.  
Francis Drake, the explorer, saw the Pacific Ocean for the first time.
- 1572** John Donne, the English poet, was born.
- 1576** James Burbage built a new theatre, "The Theatre", in Shoreditch, North London.

## SHAKESPEARE'S HISTORY

- 1564** William Shakespeare was born.
- 1566** Gilbert, his brother, was born.
- 1568** John Shakespeare, his father, was made deputy major<sup>1</sup> of Stratford.
- 1569** Joan, his sister, was born.
- 1570** John Shakespeare, was accused of lending money with interest.
- 1571** Anne, his sister, was born.
- 1572** John Shakespeare was fined<sup>2</sup> for buying and selling wool illegally.



Francis Drake

1. *deputy major*: the vice of the person elected to govern a town/city.  
2. *was fined*: had to pay a sum of money for an offence.



**BEFORE READING**

**1** What do you know about William Shakespeare? True or false? Put the correct answer in the box provided.

- |   | T                        | F                        |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| a. William Shakespeare was the son of a famous actor.                     | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b. He was born in Stratford Upon Avon in Warwickshire.                    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| c. He married Anne Hathaway when he was only eighteen.                    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| d. He went to Oxford University.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| e. He was an actor and a playwright.                                      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| f. The Globe Theatre, where his plays were produced, burned down in 1613. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| g. He died in poverty in London.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| h. He is buried in Holy Trinity Church in Stratford.                      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

**2** How many plays are we sure that he wrote? Circle the number of plays which were published in the First Folio.

11, 16, 28, 33, 36, 39, 41, 47.

**3** Underline the plays in the following list which were written by him.

- a. *Tamburlaine*
- b. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
- c. *Julius Caesar*
- d. *Lady Windermere's Fan*
- e. *King John*
- f. *The Alchemist*
- g. *A Winter's Tale*

**4** Shakespeare was born in 1564. Which of the following events took place in the same year? Tick the appropriate answers.

- The fire of London.
- Galileo Galilei, the Italian astronomer and physicist, was born.
- Mary Queen of Scots was executed.
- Michelangelo, the Italian artist, architect and sculptor, died.
- Vespucci discovered the Americas.
- Christopher Marlowe, the English dramatist and poet, was born.
- John Calvin, the leader of the Protestant rebellion in Geneva, died.
- Montaigne was born.

**5** Have you ever seen any performances or films of Shakespeare's plays?

If so, which ones? .....

If not, which would you like to see? .....

# The Swan On The Avon

## Early days

### Chapter 1



*"I know a place where wild thyme<sup>1</sup> blows  
where primulas and violets grow."*

*(A Midsummer Night's Dream, Act II, Sc. I)*

The little market town of Stratford was sleepy on a spring morning in April. The waters of the river Avon ran on through the green heart of England. A swan<sup>2</sup> floated<sup>3</sup> under the bridge and the willow<sup>4</sup> branches, past Holy Trinity Church, a white shadow which disappeared into the distance.

A window was open upstairs in the big house, New Place; two schoolboys ran past its walled garden, down Chapel Lane, talking happily, and not thinking about life's mysteries. They just didn't want to be late for school and were hurrying to arrive before the master so that he wouldn't tell them off<sup>5</sup>.

1. *thyme*: a wild herb used in cooking and for medicinal purposes.
2. *swan*: a beautiful white bird with a long neck.
3. *floated*: moved slowly on water.

4. *willow*: a tree with long delicate branches which often grows near rivers.
5. *tell (them) off*: get angry with (them).