

# THE PLAYWRIGHT



## WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 to John and Mary Arden Shakespeare and raised in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, in England's West Country.

Much of the information about him comes from official documents such as wills, legal documents and court records. There are also contemporary references to him and his writing. While much of the biographical information is sketchy and incomplete, for a person of his class and as the son of a town alderman, quite a lot of information is available.

Young Shakespeare would have attended the Stratford grammar school, where he would have learned to read and write not only English, but also Latin and some Greek. In 1582, at age 18, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, and the couple would have three children: Susanna in 1583 and twins Hamnet and Judith in 1585.

After an eight-year gap where Shakespeare's activity is not known, he appeared in London by 1592 and quickly began to make a name for himself as a prolific playwright. He stayed in London for about 20 years, becoming increasingly successful in his work as an actor, writer and shareholder in his acting company. Retirement took him back to Stratford to lead the life of a country gentleman. His son Hamnet died at age 11, but both daughters were married: Susanna to Dr. John Hall and Judith to Thomas Quiney.

Shakespeare died in Stratford in 1616 on April 23, which is thought to be his birthday. He is buried in the parish church, where his grave can be seen to this day. His known body of work includes at least 37 plays, two long poems and 154 sonnets.

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# THEATRE IN SHAKESPEARE'S TIME

## THE STAGE

The theatre where audiences watched Shakespeare's company perform many of his plays was called The Globe, situated on the south side of London. It is thought that the stage was several feet above the ground where the people who paid a penny (the groundlings) stood, and that it extended into the audience from the backstage wall.

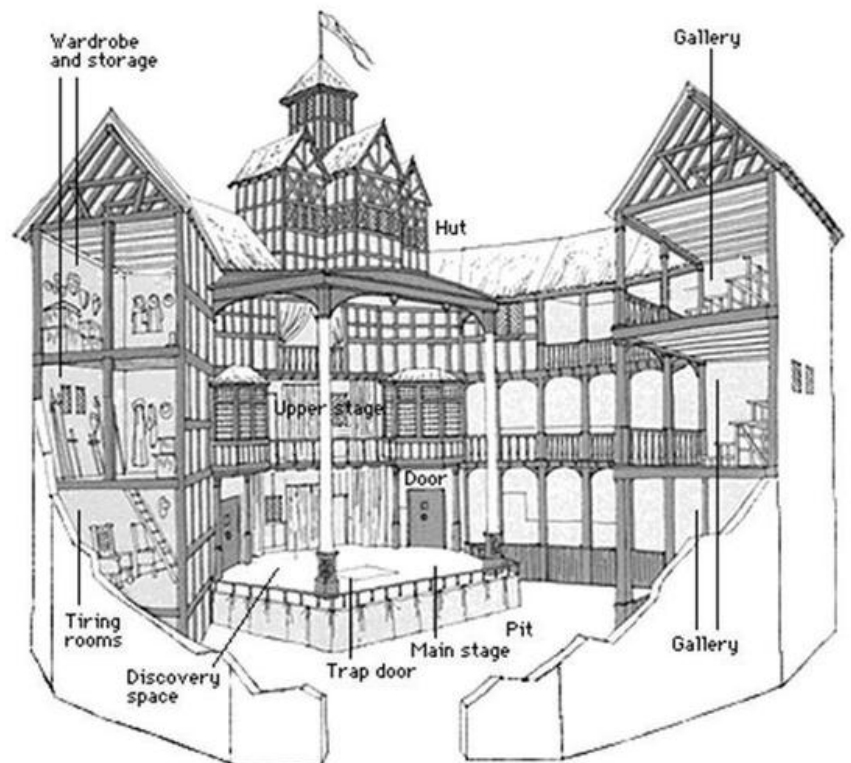
Most Elizabethan theaters were built after the design of the original Globe. Built of wood, these theaters comprised three tiers of seats in a circular shape, with a stage area on one side of the circle. The audience's seats and part of the stage were roofed and much of the main stage and the area in front of the stage was open to the elements. About 1,500 audience members could pay an extra fee to sit in the covered seating areas, while about 800 groundlings paid less to stand in the open area before the stage.

The stage had four possible entrances on the main floor and three entrances on the second floor, so that large groups such as the whole of a King's court could enter and be onstage at the same time. In the floor of the main stage, there were two trapdoors, where ghosts and apparitions could come from below stage, and which could open to reveal other special effects, like the witches in *Macbeth*.

All the main architectural features in the photo were permanent; some plays added various kinds of staircases to get from the first level of the stage to the balcony, and some plays separate the balcony completely from the main floor, so that actors have to go up or down stairs, which are hidden backstage.

What could change were the curtains or doors at the front of the inner below. They could be of several different colors and could be kept open or closed. They could be doors; plain wood, or decorated, or replaced with iron gates. Various kinds of furniture could be brought onto the stage through this entrance.

Before Shakespeare's time and during his boyhood, troupes of actors performed wherever they could: in halls, courts, courtyards, and any other available open spaces. In 1574, however, when Shakespeare was ten years old, the Common Council passed a law requiring plays and theaters in London to be licensed. In 1576, actor and future Lord Chamberlain's Man, James Burbage, built the first permanent theater called simply The Theatre outside London's city walls. Thereafter, many more theaters sprung up around the city, including The Globe Theatre in which most of Shakespeare's plays were premiered.



# THEATRE IN SHAKESPEARE'S TIME



## THE COSTUMES

In Shakespeare's time, acting companies spent almost as much on costumes as they do today for a television series. The costumes for productions in England were so expensive that visitors from France were a little envious. Kings and queens on the stage were almost as well-dressed as kings and queens in real life.

Where did the acting companies get their clothes? Literally "off the rack" and from used clothing sellers. Wealthy middle class people would often give their servants old clothes that they didn't want to wear any more, or would leave their clothes to the servants when they died. Since clothing was very expensive, people wore it as long as possible and passed it on from one person to another with no one being ashamed to wear hand-me-downs. However, since servants were of a lower class than their employers, they weren't allowed to wear rich fabrics, and would sell these clothes to acting companies, who were allowed to wear what they wanted in performance.

A rich king like Duncan from *Macbeth* would wear a gown of velvet, with real fur trim; if he wore a doublet, it might have gold embroidery. *Macbeth* was set in a much more barbaric time than most of his plays, so kilts with furs, leather, and earthy fabrics were often used. Similarly, today's audiences want costumes to be more authentic, so that they can believe in the world of the play.



# SHAKESPEARE'S CANON

One important difference between plays written in Shakespeare's time and those written today is that Elizabethan plays were published after their performances and sometimes even after their authors' deaths. The scripts were in many ways a record of what happened on stage during performances, rather than directions for what should happen. Actors were allowed to suggest changes to scenes and dialogue and had much more freedom with their parts than contemporary actors.

Shakespeare's plays were published in various forms and with a wide range of accuracy during his time. The discrepancies between versions of his plays from one publication to the next make it difficult for editors to put together authoritative editions of his works. Plays could be published in large anthologies in folio format (the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays contains 36 plays) or smaller Quartos. Folios were so named because of the way their paper was folded in half to make a large volume. Quartos were smaller, cheaper books containing only one play. Their paper was folded twice, making four pages. In general, the First Folio is considered to be more reliable than the Quartos.

## EARLY PERIOD

- ca. 1587–92 The Two Gentlemen of Verona
- ca. 1589–90 Titus Andronicus
- ca. 1590 Henry IV, Part II
- ca. 1590–91 Henry IV, Part III
- ca. 1591 The Taming of the Shrew
- ca. 1592 Henry IV, Part I; Richard III
- ca. 1594 The Comedy of Errors; Love's Labour's Lost

## MIDDLE PERIOD

- ca. 1595 Richard II; Romeo and Juliet
- ca. 1596 A Midsummer Night's Dream; King John; The Merchant of Venice
- ca. 1598 Henry IV, Part I; Henry IV, Part II; Much Ado About Nothing
- ca. 1599 Henry V; Julius Caesar
- ca. 1600 As You Like It; The Merry Wives of Windsor
- ca. 1601 Twelfth Night
- ca. 1602 Troilus and Cressida
- ca. 1602–04 Hamlet
- ca. 1604 Othello; Measure for Measure
- ca. 1605–06 All's Well That Ends Well; King Lear; Macbeth

## LATE PERIOD

- ca. 1606 Timon of Athens; Antony and Cleopatra
- ca. 1608 Pericles; Coriolanus
- ca. 1609–11 The Winter's Tale
- ca. 1610 Cymbeline
- ca. 1611 The Tempest
- ca. 1613 Henry VIII
- ca. 1613–14 The Two Noble Kinsmen

Authorship and dating of Shakespeare's plays is a subject of much academic debate. These dates are speculative, but are the "most probable" dating from [The New Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works](#).