Summary Article: Shakespeare, William
From The Columbia Encyclopedia

1564–1616, English dramatist and poet, b. Stratford-upon-Avon. He is widely considered the greatest playwright who ever lived.

Life

His father, John Shakespeare, was successful in the leather business during Shakespeare’s early childhood but later met with financial difficulties. During his prosperous years his father was also involved in municipal affairs, holding the offices of alderman and bailiff during the 1560s. While little is known of Shakespeare’s boyhood, he probably attended the grammar school in Stratford, where he would have been educated in the classics, particularly Latin grammar and literature. Whatever the veracity of Ben Jonson’s famous comment that Shakespeare had “small Latine, and less Greeke,” much of his work clearly depends on a knowledge of Roman comedy, ancient history, and classical mythology.

In 1582 Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, eight years his senior and pregnant at the time of the marriage. They had three children: Susanna, born in 1583, and twins, Hamnet and Judith, born in 1585. Nothing is known of the period between the birth of the twins and Shakespeare’s emergence as a playwright in London (c.1592). However, various suggestions have been made regarding this time, including those that he fled Stratford to avoid prosecution for stealing deer, that he joined a group of traveling players, and that he was a country schoolteacher. The last suggestion is given some credence by the academic style of his early plays; The Comedy of Errors, for example, is an adaptation of two plays by Plautus.

In 1594 Shakespeare became an actor and playwright for the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, the company that later became the King’s Men under James I. Until the end of his London career Shakespeare remained with the company; it is thought that as an actor he played old men’s roles, such as the ghost in Hamlet and Old Adam in As You Like It. In 1596 he obtained a coat of arms, and by 1597 he was prosperous enough to buy New Place in Stratford, which later was the home of his retirement years. In 1599 he became a partner in the ownership of the Globe theatre, and in 1608 he was part owner of the Blackfriars theatre. Shakespeare retired and returned to Stratford c.1613. He undoubtedly enjoyed a comfortable living throughout his career and in retirement, although he was never a wealthy man.

The Plays

Chronology of Composition

The chronology of Shakespeare’s plays is uncertain, but a reasonable approximation of their order can be inferred from dates of publication, references in contemporary writings, allusions in the plays to contemporary events, thematic relationships, and metrical and stylistic comparisons. His first plays are believed to be the three parts of Henry VI; it is uncertain whether Part I was written before or after

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Parts II and III. Richard III is related to these plays and is usually grouped with them as the final part of a first tetralogy of historical plays.

After these come The Comedy of Errors, Titus Andronicus (almost a third of which may have been written by George Peele), The Taming of the Shrew, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, Love's Labour's Lost, and Romeo and Juliet. Some of the comedies of this early period are classical imitations with a strong element of farce. The two tragedies, Titus Andronicus and Romeo and Juliet, were both popular in Shakespeare’s own lifetime. In Romeo and Juliet the main plot, in which the new love between Romeo and Juliet comes into conflict with the longstanding hatred between their families, is skillfully advanced, while the substantial development of minor characters supports and enriches it.

After these early plays, and before his great tragedies, Shakespeare wrote Richard II, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, King John, The Merchant of Venice, Parts I and II of Henry IV, Much Ado about Nothing, Henry V, Julius Caesar, As You Like It, and Twelfth Night. The comedies of this period partake less of farce and more of idyllic romance, while the history plays successfully integrate political elements with individual characterization. Taken together, Richard II, each part of Henry IV, and Henry V form a second tetralogy of historical plays, although each can stand alone, and they are usually performed separately. The two parts of Henry IV feature Falstaff, a vividly depicted character who from the beginning has enjoyed immense popularity.

The period of Shakespeare’s great tragedies and the “problem plays” begins in 1600 with Hamlet. Following this are The Merry Wives of Windsor (written to meet Queen Elizabeth’s request for another play including Falstaff, it is not thematically typical of the period), Troilus and Cressida, All’s Well That Ends Well, Measure for Measure, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth, Antony and Cleopatra, Coriolanus, and Timon of Athens (the last may have been partially written by Thomas Middleton).

On familial, state, and cosmic levels, Othello, Lear, and Macbeth present clear oppositions of order and chaos, good and evil, and spirituality and animality. Stylistically the plays of this period become increasingly compressed and symbolic. Through the portrayal of political leaders as tragic heroes, Coriolanus and Antony and Cleopatra involve the study of politics and social history as well as the psychology of individuals.

The last two plays in the Shakespearean corpus, Henry VIII and The Two Noble Kinsmen, may be collaborations with John Fletcher. Shakespeare also may have had a small part in writing the play Double Falsehood, first published in 1727 and thought to be mainly the work of Fletcher. The remaining four plays—Pericles (two acts of which may have been written by George Wilkins), Cymbeline, The Winter’s Tale, and The Tempest—are tragicomedies. They feature characters of tragic potential, but resemble comedy in that their conclusions are marked by a harmonious resolution achieved through magic, with all its divine, humanistic, and artistic implications.

Appeal and Influence

Since his death Shakespeare’s plays have been almost continually performed, in non-English-speaking nations as well as those where English is the native tongue; they are quoted more than the works of any other single author. The plays have been subject to ongoing examination and evaluation by critics attempting to explain their perennial appeal, which does not appear to derive from any set of profound or explicitly formulated ideas. Indeed, Shakespeare has sometimes been criticized for not consistently holding to any particular philosophy, religion, or ideology; for example, the subplot of A Midsummer
Night’s Dream includes a burlesque of the kind of tragic love that he idealizes in Romeo and Juliet.

The strength of Shakespeare’s plays lies in the absorbing stories they tell, in their wealth of complex characters, and in the eloquent speech—vivid, forceful, and at the same time lyric—that the playwright puts on his characters’ lips. It has often been noted that Shakespeare’s characters are neither wholly good nor wholly evil, and that it is their flawed, inconsistent nature that makes them memorable. Hamlet fascinates audiences with his ambivalence about revenge and the uncertainty over how much of his madness is feigned and how much genuine. Falstaff would not be beloved if, in addition to being genial, openhearted, and witty, he were not also boisterous, cowardly, and, ultimately, poignant. Finally, the plays are distinguished by an unparalleled use of language. Shakespeare had a tremendous vocabulary and a corresponding sensitivity to nuance, as well as a singular aptitude for coining neologisms and punning.

Editions and Sources

The first collected edition of Shakespeare is the First Folio, published in 1623 and including all the plays except Pericles and The Two Noble Kinsmen (the latter play also generally not appearing in modern editions). Eighteen of the plays exist in earlier quarto editions, eight of which are extremely corrupt, possibly having been reconstructed from an actor’s memory. The first edition of Shakespeare to divide the plays into acts and scenes and to mark exits and entrances is that of Nicholas Rowe in 1709. Other important early editions include those of Alexander Pope (1725), Lewis Theobald (1733), and Samuel Johnson (1765).

Among Shakespeare’s most important sources, Raphael Holinshed’s Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland (1587) is significant for the English history plays, although Shakespeare did not hesitate to transform a character when it suited his dramatic purposes. For his Roman tragedies he used Sir Thomas North’s translation (1579) of Plutarch’s Lives. Many times he rewrote old plays, and twice he turned English prose romances into drama (As You Like It and The Winter’s Tale). He also used the works of contemporary European authors. For further information on Shakespeare’s sources, see the table entitled Shakespeare’s Play.

The Poetry

Shakespeare’s first published works were two narrative poems, Venus and Adonis (1593) and The Rape of Lucrece (1594). In 1599 a volume of poetry entitled The Passionate Pilgrim was published and attributed entirely to Shakespeare. However, only five of the poems are definitely considered his, two appearing in other versions in the Sonnets and three in Love’s Labour’s Lost. A love elegy, The Phoenix and the Turtle, was published in 1601.

Shakespeare’s sonnets are by far his most important nondramatic poetry. They were first published in 1609, although many of them had certainly been circulated privately before this, and it is generally agreed that the poems were written sometime in the 1590s. Scholars have long debated the order of the poems and the degree of autobiographical content.

The first 126 of the 154 sonnets are addressed to a young man whose identity has long intrigued scholars. The publisher, Thomas Thorpe, wrote a dedication to the first edition in which he claimed that a person with the initials W. H. had inspired the sonnets. Some have thought these letters to be the transposed initials of Henry Wriothesley, 3d earl of Southampton, to whom Shakespeare dedicated Venus and Adonis and The Rape of Lucrece; or they are possibly the initials of William Herbert, 3d earl
of Pembroke, whose connection with Shakespeare is more tenuous. The identity of the dark lady addressed in sonnets 127–152 has also been the object of much conjecture but no proof. The sonnets are marked by the recurring themes of beauty, youthful beauty ravaged by time, and the ability of love and art to transcend time and even death.

Critical Opinion

There has been a great variety of critical approach to Shakespeare's work since his death. During the 17th and 18th cent., Shakespeare was both admired and condemned. Since then, much of the adverse criticism has not been considered relevant, although certain issues have continued to interest critics throughout the years. For instance, charges against his moral propriety were made by Samuel Johnson in the 18th cent. and by George Bernard Shaw in the 20th.

Early criticism was directed primarily at questions of form. Shakespeare was criticized for mixing comedy and tragedy and failing to observe the unities of time and place prescribed by the rules of classical drama. Dryden and Johnson were among the critics claiming that he had corrupted the language with false wit, puns, and ambiguity. While some of his early plays might justly be charged with a frivolous use of such devices, 20th-century criticism has tended to praise their use in later plays as adding depth and resonance of meaning.

Generally critics of the 17th and 18th cent. accused Shakespeare of a want of artistic restraint while praising him for a fecund imagination. Samuel Johnson, while agreeing with many earlier criticisms, defended Shakespeare on the question of classical rules. On the issue of unity of time and place he argued that no one considers the stage play to be real life anyway. Johnson inaugurated the criticism of Shakespeare's characters that reached its culmination in the late 19th cent. with the work of A. C. Bradley. The German critics Gotthold Lessing and Augustus Wilhelm von Schlegel saw Shakespeare as a romantic, different in type from the classical poets, but on equal footing. Schlegel first elucidated the structural unity of Shakespeare's plays, a concept of unity that is developed much more completely by the English poet and critic Samuel Coleridge.

While Schlegel and Coleridge were establishing Shakespeare's plays as artistic, organic unities, such 19th-century critics as the German Georg Gervinus and the Irishman Edward Dowden were trying to see positive moral tendencies in the plays. The 19th-century English critic William Hazlitt, who continued the development of character analysis begun by Johnson, considered each Shakespearean character to be unique, but found a unity through analogy and gradation of characterization. While A. C. Bradley marks the culmination of romantic 19th-century character study, he also suggested that the plays had unifying imagistic atmospheres, an idea that was further developed in the 20th cent.

The tendency in 20th-century criticism was to abandon both the study of character as independent personality and the assumption that moral considerations can be separated from their dramatic and aesthetic context. The plays were increasingly viewed in terms of the unity of image, metaphor, and tone. Caroline Spurgeon began the careful classification of Shakespeare's imagery, and although her attempts were later felt to be somewhat naive and morally biased, her work is a landmark in Shakespearean criticism. Other important trends in 20th-century criticism included the Freudian approach, such as Ernest Jones's Oedipal interpretation of Hamlet; the study of Shakespeare in terms of the Elizabethan world view and Elizabethan stage conventions; and the study of the plays in mythic terms.
Authorship

For about 150 years after his death no one seemed to doubt that Shakespeare wrote the works attributed to him. However, in the latter part of the 18th cent. questions began to arise as to whether or not the historical William Shakespeare was indeed the author. Since then the issue has continued to be a subject of often heated debate, albeit mainly in academic circles. Those who doubt that Shakespeare wrote the works (sometimes called “anti-Stratfordians”) generally assert that the actor from Stratford had a limited education; some have even claimed that he was illiterate. Many of the questioners maintain that such a provincial upstart could not have had the wide-ranging worldly and scholarly knowledge, linguistic skills, and fine sensibilities evinced by the author of the Shakespearean canon. Such qualities, they assert, could only have been possessed by a university-educated gentleman, multilingual, well-traveled, and quite possibly titled. Critics further contend that playwriting was a lowly profession at the time and that the “real” author protected his reputation by using Shakespeare’s name as a pseudonym. Over the years, many other arguments, some involving secret codes, some even more abstruse, have been offered to cast doubt on Shakespeare’s authorship.

On the other hand, traditionalists (“Stratfordians”) who believe that William Shakespeare was indeed the author of the plays and poems, point out that his probable education at the Stratford grammar school would have provided the required knowledge of the classics and classical civilization as well as of Latin and at least some Greek. They also maintain that what can be assumed to be his broad reading of historical sources along with his daily involvement in the lively worlds of Elizabethan London—artistic and intellectual, ordinary and aristocratic—would, when transmuted by his genius, have provided Shakespeare with the necessary background to create his dramatic and poetic works. Moreover, they say, Shakespeare was known to his contemporaries, as attested to by a number of extant references to him as a writer by other notable men of his time.

Anti-Stratfordians have suggested a number of Elizabethans as candidates for the “real” author of the works. From the late 18th through the 19th cent. the individual most often cited was Francis Bacon, who had the requisite aristocratic background, education, courtly experience, and literary talent. Others claimed that Bacon was one of a group that collectively wrote the Shakespearean oeuvre. In the 20th cent. a new candidate emerged as the authorial front runner—Edward de Vere, 17th earl of Oxford. His proponents, the Oxfordians, cited correspondences between events in his life and those in some of the plays, apparent similarities in the two men's language, and Oxford's proven skills as a dramatist and poet. Prominent among the many reasons to doubt de Vere's authorship is the fact that he died in 1604 and that some of Shakespeare’s greatest works were written well after that date.

More than 50 other names have been put forward as the “real” Shakespeare, ranging from the implausible, e.g., Queen Elizabeth I, to the somewhat more possible, e.g., Christopher Marlowe; William Stanley, 6th earl of Derby; and Roger Manners, 5th earl of Rutland. Still others have suggested that the works were the result of a collaboration by two or more Elizabethan writers. In 2005 a new candidate, Sir Henry Neville, a courtier, diplomat, and distant relative of Shakespeare, was proposed. Even as studies and biographies of Shakespeare proliferate, the authorship controversy shows few signs of subsiding, and books, scholarly essays, and, more recently, websites continue to be devoted to the question. Scholars have also suggested that some of the plays were cowritten. The New Oxford Shakespeare (2016) identified 17 plays as cowritten, crediting Marlowe as coauthor of the Henry VI plays.

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