



The Young Shakespeareans

BIOGRAPHY of WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Early Life

It is generally believed that William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, England on April 23, 1564 (over 450 years ago) and died on April 23, 1616 at the age of 52. His father, John, was a glove maker and his mother, Mary, was a farmer's daughter. He had two older sisters, two younger sisters, and three younger brothers. William left school when he was about 14, and at the age of 18, he married Anne Hathaway, who was 26. They had a daughter, Susanne, and twins Judith and Hamnet (Hamnet died at age 11).

London and the Lost Years

There are no records of the next several years of Shakespeare's life after the children were born. Historians refer to this period as the "lost years". We do know that he and his family ended up in London where he worked as an actor, and he began writing plays during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I.

In 1593, the Bubonic Plague (Black Death) killed more than 10,000 people in London, and all the theaters were closed. During this time, Shakespeare wrote poems instead of plays - his short poems are called Sonnets (a fourteen-line poem written in rhyme and iambic pentameter). The plague passed after about a year, and in 1594, Shakespeare founded an acting troupe, the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later called the King's Men), which was very successful. There were typically ten actors in the company including a lead actor, character actors, and some comedians. During this time, the most famous plays Shakespeare wrote were "Romeo & Juliet" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream". Young boys played the female characters because women were not allowed to perform on public stages.

The Globe Theatre

In 1599, the Lord Chamberlain's Men finished building a new place for their performances. The Globe Theatre was round, housed up to 3,000 spectators, and had a uniquely designed stage with a painted ceiling, columns, and stage wall. Wealthy people sat high in the balcony seats, and regular people sat or stood on the ground at the foot of the stage - these people were referred to as Groundlings. Many of Shakespeare's plays were performed by the most famous actors of his time, and there were specially trained musicians who created special effects noises during the performances. The audience, royal and not, shouted, clapped, booed and laughed as they watched.

Shakespeare wrote many types of plays: comedies with happy endings like "A Midsummer Night's Dream"; tragedies with heart-breaking endings like "Romeo and Juliet"; and historic plays about Kings and Queens like "Henry V". Many of Shakespeare's greatest plays were written in the last half of his life including "Hamlet", "Othello", "King Lear", and "Macbeth".

Shakespeare loved language and invented words and expressions that we still use today: "Off with his head!", "Break the ice", "Fight fire with fire", "Love is blind", "Vanish into thin air", and many more. His plays and poetry were very popular 400 years ago, not only amongst royalty and the rich, but for regular people as well. They remain popular all over the world today because they tell stories of human nature, love, revenge, jealousy, rage and joy that most people experience in their lives.

Shakespeare's tombstone reads:

*GOOD FRENDE FOR JESUS SAKE FORBEARE,
TO DIGG THE DUST ENCLOSED HEARE.
BLESE BE [the] MAN [that] SPARES THES STONES,
AND CURST BE HE [that] MOVES MY BONES.*

Though it was customary to dig up the bones from previous graves to make room for others, Shakespeare's remains undisturbed.