WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1564–1616)

Stratford, 1564–1585

Early plays, 1589–1595

Comedies and Histories, 1595–1601

Tragedies, 1599–1608

Late plays, 1608-1613

Sonnets (1609)

First Folio (1623)

The canonical plays

The man from Stratford

The Oxford theory

Shakespeare’s ambition

Bibliographical note

1) Shakespeare was born at Stratford-upon-Avon, where his father was a glovemaker and trader in agricultural produce. As an alderman, John Shakespeare was a prominent citizen who rose to the office of mayor (“bailiff”) in 1568, although he soon after fell on hard times and, ten years later, was badly in debt. Shakespeare’s mother was the daughter of a well-to-do farmer from the neighboring village of Wilmcote, a fact which suggests that Mary Arden married beneath the gentry class in which she was brought up. William would have been educated at the local grammar school, studying Latin and reading classical literature. In November, 1582 he married Anne Hathaway, eight years his senior, who bore him a daughter six months later.

2) There is no record of Shakespeare’s activities during the more than seven years from February, 1585, when his only other children (twins) were baptized, until the autumn of 1592, when he turns up as an established playwright in London. According to a tradition dating from the later seventeenth century, Shakespeare spent part of these “lost” years teaching Latin in a country school, a circumstance that would account for his easy command of the language. In the eighteenth century, Edmond Malone, the greatest of Shakespeare scholars, noted that two of the London theater troupes were under the patronage of the earls of Warwick and Leicester, both of whom lived within a few miles of Stratford; and Malone conjectured that when another company, the Queen’s Men, performed in the town in 1587, Shakespeare might have joined the players and returned with them to the metropolis.

EIGHT EARLY PLAYS AND THE NARRATIVE POEMS, 1587(?)–1594

3) Whether he began his apprenticeship as writer or as actor, Shakespeare combined both talents in a theatrical career that blossomed quickly. He is first mentioned in print by the gifted playwright, Robert Greene, who attacks him as a prominent rival. Writing just before his death in September 1592, Greene inveighs against this “upstart crow” as “the only Shake-scene in the country.” Greene also parodies a line from Henry VI, a three-part drama that, with Richard III, makes up Shakespeare’s initial sequence of four history plays on the Wars of the Roses. By 1592, the plague was causing the theaters to shut down for extended periods. Shakespeare had already completed his crude tragedy of revenge, Titus Andronicus. In addition to these five serious plays which, despite stumblings by the journeyman, plainly reveal a master-playwright, Shakespeare would have put the finishing touches to his three earliest comedies: The Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Taming of the Shrew, and
The Comedy of Errors. During the enforced closing of the theaters for nearly two years down to April, 1594, Shakespeare published Venus and Adonis and The Rape of Lucrece, dedicating these narrative poems to a noble patron, the earl of Southampton. Meanwhile he began Romeo and Juliet, the tragedy that, together with the sensational Titus Andronicus, assured his popularity.

4) By 1595, with the theaters regularly open again, Shakespeare had found the lyrical vein of poetry that strongly marks his next four works: Romeo and Juliet, Love's Labor's Lost, Richard II, and A Midsummer Night's Dream. He had become a key member of the Lord Chamberlain's company of players, sharing in its profits along with its owner James Burbage and his son Richard, the famous actor. This company acted at a playhouse named simply the Theatre, situated north of the Thames just outside the City. Their chief rival was the Lord Admiral's company located south of the Thames on the Bankside. By 1599, Shakespeare's company would finally prevail against their competitors and move into the new Globe playhouse on the Bankside. The Lord Chamberlain's men were invited often to play before Queen Elizabeth and, at her death in 1603, would be officially adopted as the King's company when James succeeded to the throne.

COMEDIES AND HISTORIES, 1595–1601

5) To these years belong eight of Shakespeare’s nine mature comedies. Six of them that celebrate young love are known as the “romantic” comedies (Love's Labor's Lost; A Midsummer Night's Dream; The Merchant of Venice; Much Ado About Nothing; As You Like It; Twelfth Night). A seventh comedy from this middle period, The Merry Wives of Windsor (1597), is mainly a farce exploiting the enormous popularity of Falstaff, Shakespeare’s fat knight whom Queen Elizabeth, according to legend, wanted to see in love. Two more mid-career comedies, appearing after 1600 when Shakespeare had turned his attention to tragedy, are less romantic and more realistic: All’s Well That Ends Well (1601?) and Measure for Measure (1603–4).

6) At the same time that he was one of its actors, Shakespeare was also the company's main playwright, producing two plays annually during these astonishingly creative years. Besides his tragedy of Romeo and Juliet, his comedies, and an isolated history play, King John (1594–96), Shakespeare wrote a second sequence of plays on English history, going back to the kings who had preceded Henry VI and the Wars of the Roses. The first play in the new sequence, Richard II, was followed by the three plays known as the Henriad: Henry IV (in two parts) and Henry V. With his two tetralogies (sets of four plays) on the English kings from Richard II to Richard III, Shakespeare perfected the dramatic genre known as “histories.” Shakespeare’s chief aim was to get his audience to reflect on England’s past, but in Henry V, he makes the Chorus or prologue for act 5 allude to one of the company’s patrons, the ambitious earl of Essex, who at the time (1599) enjoyed Queen Elizabeth’s favor. The company would be acutely embarrassed two years later when Essex, to bolster his abortive uprising against the queen, hired the actors to stage Richard II. The rebel earl wanted to bring out the parallel between Elizabeth and the weak Plantagenet king who had forfeited his crown to Henry IV. Elizabeth, furious, is reported to have said, “I am Richard II. Know ye not that?” Ten years after Elizabeth's death, Shakespeare would add to his nine acknowledged plays on English history a tenth play, Henry VIII (1613).

TRAGEDIES, 1599–1608

7) In the years before 1593, a non-Shakespearean play called Hamlet had been popular on the London stage. Around the turn of the century, Shakespeare decided to rewrite this lost revenge play. Hamlet (1600), his most famous tragedy, is also the play that he seems to have reworked the most. Existing in three different versions, Hamlet is nearly half again as long as the other tragedies. It was followed by Othello (1602–3), King Lear (1605), and Macbeth (1606). Besides these four great tragedies, during these years Shakespeare wrote five more tragic dramas on subjects taken from ancient Greece and Rome. Troilus and Cressida (1601) is an obscurely satirical rendering of the Trojan wars, while the misanthropic Timon of Athens (1605–6?) expresses the futility of King Lear but without Lear’s offsetting compassion. The other three tragedies take up Roman subjects handled earlier in the pseudo-historical Titus Andronicus. Shakespeare, newly inspired by having discovered Plutarch's lives of the Greeks and Romans, wrote his three great Roman tragedies. Julius Caesar (1599) and Antony and
Shakespeare

*Cleopatra* (1606) portray the collapse of the republic and the founding of the Roman empire, while *Coriolanus* (1608) goes all the way back to Rome’s early republic. In this final tragedy of the eleven authored solely by him, Shakespeare connects the Roman mob with contemporary politics, making an unusually topical reference to the grain riots in England’s Midlands the previous summer.

**LATE PLAYS (1608–1611), SONNETS, AND THE CANON**

8) Before we go on to Shakespeare’s last plays and his retirement after 1611, it will help to glance ahead and see how the canon took shape. Seven years after Shakespeare’s death, his fellow-actors Heminge and Condell would gather thirty-six of his plays into the magnificent First Folio (1623). They divided the plays into comedies, tragedies, and histories. Reprinted three times in the seventeenth century, the Folio by 1664 had added two collaborative works: *Pericles*, a badly printed play that had been rejected by the Folio’s two actor-editors; and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, a play mostly by John Fletcher on which Shakespeare must have collaborated from retirement. Exactly a century after his birth, then, the Shakespearean canon was completed and has remained closed ever since. Heminge and Condell evidently knew what they were doing; none of their ascriptions has been challenged. If anything, they were overcautious. Modern collections always include *Pericles*; many include *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. Recently, several scholars have argued for admitting a third play to the canon, *Edward III*. This play, published anonymously in 1595, may very well have been conceived by Shakespeare as a prelude to his great tetralogy on the Lancastrians (above, paragraph 6. For a full enumeration of the canon, see below, paragraph 11).

9) Certainly *Edward III* contains a number of lines that are found recycled in Shakespeare’s subsequent plays and in his *Sonnets* (1609). “Recycled” is the right word; it was never Shakespeare’s way to borrow phrases and lines from anyone but himself. There are many echoes of his plays in the Sonnets, a number of which may have been written as early as 1595; two of them (sonnets 138 and 144) were printed in 1599. Scholars used to think the publication of the Sonnets was unauthorized and furtive, but recently the New Arden editor has argued that Shakespeare himself delivered his much-revised manuscript to the publisher, Thomas Thorpe. Shakespeare may have decided to publish these intimate poems in the knowledge that, by 1609, his relations with friends of whom he had written so frankly—the noble youth and the “dark lady”—were safely buried in the past. In his care to conceal the identities of the persons involved, he created something like a *roman à clef* for which we have lost the key. Eleven years before, in 1598, Shakespeare’s readers had been talking about “his sugared Sonnets among his private friends.”

10) Who was the young man to whom most of the sonnets are addressed? The best candidate is William Herbert, the earl of Pembroke, who would have been fifteen in 1595 when he was contemplating marriage and to whom, twenty-eight years later, the Folio was to be dedicated. The first 126 sonnets mainly describe the noble youth. The poet starts out urging him to marry and beget children, but by sonnet 18, he is promising to make the youth immortal through his verse instead. The poet’s praise of his “master-mistress” (sonnet 20) turns into harsh criticism, however, in sonnets like 33, 69, 87, and 94. These ambivalent poems alternate with the confident love expressed in such sonnets as 55, 107, 116, and the cycle-ending poem 126. Most of the remaining sonnets, 127 through 154, form a second cycle involving the poet’s relation with a “dark lady” whom he treats quite insultingly and who may be a fiction, unlike the attractive young man whom the poet loved. Shakespeare perhaps invented the “dark lady” to symbolize his own lust and self-delusion, powerfully expressed in sonnets 129 and 152. The three-sonnet sequence from 144 to 146 illustrates the poet’s range of sentiments. “Two loves I have, of comfort and despair,” he complains in sonnet 144. Next, he inserts a juvenile poem (145) containing a pun on his wife’s name, Hathaway; and he follows that up with the austere renunciation of sonnet 146 (“Poor soul, the center of my sinful earth”).

11) The Folio contains none of Shakespeare’s poems, but if we add to its authoritative canon of thirty-six plays the three plays attributed later, we get a total of thirty-nine: the twelve comedies already enumerated, the twelve tragedies (including *The Two Noble Kinsmen*), the eleven histories (including *Edward III*), and four remaining comedies: *Pericles* (1608), *The Winter’s Tale* (1609), *Cymbeline* (1610), and *The Tempest* (1611).
Stylistically, these late comedies form a distinct group that, with *Henry VIII* (1613) and the playwright’s contributions to *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1613–14), rounds out Shakespeare’s career.

12) The four late comedies are so classified because they end happily with reunions and marriages. At the same time, all of them stage apparent tragedies and all but *The Tempest* contain actual deaths. Ever since the late-nineteenth century, scholars have dubbed these four plays “romances” because their plots are based loosely on the adventure novels of late antiquity and the middle ages. *Pericles* and *The Winter’s Tale* are indeed Mediterranean romances, rambling tales that span two generations of the life cycle. But *Cymbeline* deals with historical politics and is set in the royal household of ancient Britain at the time of England’s rebellion against her Roman overlords. And *The Tempest* is a tightly unified play about Prospero’s island dynasty that has lately drawn the attention of scholars interested in Shakespeare’s “colonial imperialism,” that is, his attitude towards the exploration and conquest of the New World.

13) With respect to their politics, these four late, romanticized plays make an instructive contrast with the great histories of Shakespeare’s middle years. In the 1590s, he was writing for an audience excited about the nation’s epic future; England seemed poised, after the defeat of the Spanish Armada, to spearhead a renewed Protestant Reformation. A decade later, Shakespeare had laid aside this epic of the nation and was indulging an audience interested less in England’s historical role than in the ambitions and jealousies of the court. With their narrow focus on the royal household (domus) or court as opposed to the broader political nation, the late plays offer us “domestic” romance in place of the inspiring history that Shakespeare had popularized in the years before 1600.

THE MAN FROM STRATFORD

14) Many records make it clear that Shakespeare, throughout the quarter-century he spent in London, visited Stratford regularly and acquired there substantial property. He went to the expense of securing a coat of arms for himself and his father, who consequently died a “gentleman” in 1601. Shakespeare had lost his son in 1596, but Hamnet’s twin sister, Judith, lived to be married and so did Shakespeare’s eldest daughter, Susanna. Shakespeare enjoyed some five years of retirement in prosperity, receiving visits from his fellow actors and poets. It was after one of these visits from Ben Jonson and the poet Michael Drayton, according to a later report, that Shakespeare died of a fever contracted from drinking “too hard.” Anne Shakespeare died seven years after him in 1623, and their line became extinct when their granddaughter by Susanna—Elizabeth, Lady Bernard—died childless in 1670. Only Shakespeare’s collateral family has survived, through his elder sister Joan Hart and her direct descendants.

15) Over one hundred documents tell us far more about Shakespeare than we are usually able to learn about his fellow commoners, whose public transactions were not preserved in family archives as were the letters and records of the nobility. Some fifty of his contemporaries refer to him as a famous playwright. Half a century after he died, following the Restoration (1660), Dryden and other writers began to exalt Shakespeare’s plays as legendary achievements, while readers sought to learn more about his personal life. A century after Shakespeare’s death, Nicholas Rowe, the first to edit (and not just reprint) the plays, actually visited Stratford in quest of new biographical information. In 1769, the actor David Garrick celebrated the first Stratford Jubilee. This event not only crowned the king of poets in the town of his birth, it inaugurated the modern cult of Shakespeare. By the 1790s, documents, letters, and even a play were being forged in Shakespeare’s name. Just as Malone was putting the study of Shakespeare on a firm historical basis, the Romantic critics, taking their cue from the Germans, were proclaiming Shakespeare a universal genius whose work transcended time and place.

16) In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this cult worship developed into what George Bernard Shaw called “Bardolatry.” Shakespeare’s most perceptive critics among the Romantics—Coleridge, Lamb, Hazlitt, and Keats—admired his authorial personality without delving into his private life. For those who felt that the Bard ought to have an illustrious biography, however, the documentary record was too meager. Accordingly, they pieced together a fanciful story by rearranging the facts of popular history. Francis Bacon seemed to them
a more likely author of the plays than the modestly learned schoolteacher from Stratford, even though Bacon’s writings demonstrate that the Lord Chancellor had a deaf ear for poetry.

17) Others have tried to replace Shakespeare with the earl of Oxford, who published courtly lyrics but no plays and who died in 1604, before some of the best plays were written. To have been their author, the earl must have left uncompleted masterpieces like King Lear (rewritten in 1608), must have foreseen the grain riots reported in Coriolanus, must have divined the shipwreck of 1609 on which The Tempest is literally based, and so on. Apart from these absurdities, it’s hard to see why the boastful Oxford would have chosen to write incognito. Aristocrats like the earl lived defiantly public lives, scorning to hide their sins or their literary accomplishments beneath a disguise. A nobleman’s honor rested on his public integrity, something to which no mere actor dared lay claim.

18) All the same, Shakespeare was much preoccupied with public honor. In the Sonnets, he complains that his genteel friends consider him a hypocrite for playing stage roles, whence his “name receives a brand.” To us, the characters in his plays seem to dwell overmuch on aristocratic honor, but as late as the eighteenth century his portrayals of kings and nobles were disparaged for having been too meanly drawn. It is naive to imagine that Shakespeare’s work reflects an intimate acquaintance with the court. Quite to the contrary, Shakespeare always portrays the aristocracy from the standpoint of an outsider looking in. Perhaps for that reason, his drama continues to fascinate democratic audiences like ourselves who are generally skeptical of aristocratic ideals.

19) Modern Bardolatry has thrived on the growth of our middle-class culture with its hunger for novelty. We tend to overlook the narrow scope of Shakespeare’s ambitions. His biographical record is that of a commoner who aspired to gentry status, even to the point of revising his deathbed will. He hoped to perpetuate his name by providing for his descendants. The fact that he took more care to preserve his bones in the church at Stratford than to publish his plays suggests that he did not place as high a value on literary fame as did Ben Jonson, who saw his own “Works” (as he proudly called them) into print. Shakespeare’s philosophic indifference to authorial renown also sets him apart from his Bardolaters, who reveal their snobbery when they insist on equating genius with high social standing. Their snobbery gets inverted by the “pop culturalists”; those claim, in opposition to the Bardolaters, that all robust art springs from the marginalized classes.

20) What makes the playwright from Stratford unique among great authors is the fact that he speaks for no particular social group and betrays neither a plebeian nor an aristocratic bias. Shakespeare was an uncommonly reflective dramatist. Rather than preach to his audience or write propaganda, however, he chose to embody his religious, social and historical views in a series of characters whose mores or “manners” he sensitively portrayed. His vivid scenes with their unforgettable poetry always dramatize a relationship between vital individuals who seem as immediately present to us as they are to one another. While insisting on class distinctions, Shakespeare projects a community that transcends them, and his comedies show the triumph of creative civility—just as his tragedies reveal the savagery that can result when this civility fails to contain it. Having survived four centuries of cultural evolution, Shakespeare stands paramount among English poets. His plays remain fresh despite the changes of intellectual fashion. Because their author has not allowed ideology to eclipse the perennial drama of human society, his plays are forever contemporary.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

21) Recent scholarship has successfully undermined the received texts of the plays but has not been able to produce a collected Shakespeare that matches the authority once enjoyed by the Folio and again by the nineteenth-century Globe edition of his works. The plays are best studied individually in the paperbound editions of the four major series: the New Cambridge, the Oxford, the New Penguin, and especially the Arden (now in its Third Series which is in many respects inferior to the second). For a summary of what is known about Shakespeare’s text, see Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, eds., William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion