

## William SHAKESPEARE (1564-1616)



*The Flower Portrait of William Shakespeare*  
(17th century)  
by an unknown artist.  
The Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-upon-Avon.

### Life and works

Although Shakespeare is probably the most famous writer in the world, relatively little is known about his life. He was born in Stratford-upon-Avon on 23 April, as is generally thought. His father was a glove-maker and his mother came from a prosperous family, and he was probably educated at the local grammar school. Records indicate that in 1582 he married Anne Hathaway, eight years older than him, had a daughter, Susanna, and twins, Hamnet and Judith. Nothing is known for certain about how he began his career as a writer. While London soon became the centre of Shakespeare's professional life, his family continued to live in Stratford. By 1592 he was already a well-known playwright. It was probably when the plague closed London's theatres from 1592 to 1594 that Shakespeare started to write his famous sonnets. His patron and friend was the Earl of Southampton. After the plague, Shakespeare became a leading member of the theatre company the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later renamed the King's Men when James I came

to the throne in 1603), with whom he worked for the rest of his career as actor, playwright and administrator. He later became a member of the syndicate which built the Globe Theatre. Shakespeare died when he was 52 years old. As a poet he wrote a collection of 154 sonnets and two long poems. As a playwright he wrote 37 plays, popular with both educated and uneducated audiences.

### Shakespeare's Plays

Shakespeare used many different **sources** for his plays: Holinshed's *Chronicles* for the history plays, Plutarch's *Lives* for the Roman plays, and the works of the Italian writers Bandello, Cinzio and Giovanni Fiorentino for most of his comedies. Only half of Shakespeare's plays appeared in print in his lifetime, some in texts transcribed by the actors, known as 'bad quartos' because of their textual inaccuracies. It was only in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death, that two former actors and friends of Shakespeare, Heminge and Condell, decided to publish a collection of his plays in the so-called *First Folio*, where the plays were simply grouped as Comedies, Histories and Tragedies and not by date. For this reason the dates and order of composition are generally difficult to establish. In order to give at least an approximate date to each play, editors and critics use a method based on three types of evidence:



London in Shakespeare's times: *View of London* (1650), detail, by Claes Jansz Visscher.  
The British Library, London.

- external evidence: references to Shakespeare's plays in other writers' works;
- internal evidence: references to contemporary events quoted in the plays;
- stylistic evidence: the style, plot, characters, language and metre used in the plays.

On the basis of these types of evidence Shakespeare's plays may be divided into five periods: apprenticeship (1590-5), maturity (1595-9), experiment (1600-4), tragedy (1604-8) and last plays (1609-13).

|                | Approx. date | Comedies/Romances                 | Histories                | Tragedies and Roman Plays |
|----------------|--------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| Apprenticeship | 1590-1       |                                   | Henry VI (Parts 1, 2, 3) | Titus Andronicus          |
|                | 1592         |                                   | Richard III              |                           |
|                | 1593         | <i>The Comedy of Errors</i>       |                          |                           |
|                |              | <i>The Taming of the Shrew</i>    |                          |                           |
|                | 1594         | <i>Two Gentlemen of Verona</i>    |                          |                           |
|                | 1594         | <i>Love's Labours Lost</i>        | Henry VI (1) (revised)   |                           |
| Maturity       | 1595         |                                   | King John                |                           |
|                | 1595         | <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>  | Richard II               | Romeo and Juliet          |
|                | 1596         | <i>The Merchant of Venice</i>     | Henry IV (1)             |                           |
|                | 1597         | <i>The Merry Wives of Windsor</i> | Henry IV (2)             |                           |
|                | 1598         | <i>As You Like It</i>             |                          |                           |
|                | 1599         | <i>Much Ado about Nothing</i>     | Henry V                  | Julius Caesar             |
| Experiment     | 1600         | <i>Twelfth Night</i>              |                          | Hamlet                    |
|                | 1601         |                                   |                          | Troilus and Cressida      |
|                | 1602-3       | <i>All's Well that Ends Well</i>  |                          |                           |
|                | 1604         | <i>Measure for Measure</i>        |                          |                           |
| Tragedy        | 1604         |                                   |                          | Othello                   |
|                | 1605         |                                   |                          | King Lear                 |
|                | 1606         |                                   |                          | Macbeth                   |
|                |              |                                   |                          | Antony and Cleopatra      |
|                |              |                                   |                          | Coriolanus                |
|                |              |                                   |                          | Timon of Athens           |
| Last plays     | 1607         |                                   |                          |                           |
|                | 1608         | <i>Pericles</i>                   |                          |                           |
|                | 1609         | <i>Cymbeline</i>                  |                          |                           |
|                | 1610         | <i>The Winter's Tale</i>          |                          |                           |
|                | 1611         | <i>The Tempest</i>                |                          |                           |

Among the main **themes** of Shakespeare's plays are the great universal themes of power, love, ambition, the conflict between different generations, war, death and so on. These themes are directly embodied by his characters, who belong to different social classes — from kings and queens to soldiers and servants.