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William Shakespeare | Biography

William Shakespeare's birthday is traditionally celebrated on April 23, although there are no records of his birth. The closest researchers have is a baptismal record from Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, dated April 26, 1564. His 38 plays were likely written between the late 1580s and 1613.

Marriage records show that 18-year-old William married 26-year-old Anne Hathaway in November 1582. The following year, Anne gave birth to the first of their children, Susanna. Twins Judith and Hamnet were born in 1585. Tragically, Hamnet—Shakespeare's only son—died in 1596 at age 11.

Critics such as Edward Dowden and Samuel Taylor Coleridge believed that events in Shakespeare's life influenced the writing of *Hamlet*. In particular, they point to the deaths of his father in 1601 and of his son, whose name some intimate is an alternate spelling of Hamlet.

Whether Shakespeare's grief for his dead father and son found an outlet in the writing of *Hamlet*, one pivotal piece of the drama is very likely based on a historical incident. Claudius's poisoning of King Hamlet by pouring a vial of "cursed hebona" into his ear and Hamlet's rewrite of *The Murder of Gonzago* both echo the 1538 murder of Italy's Francesco Maria Della Rovere, Duke of Urbino. Marquis Luigi Gonzaga, jealous of the duke's social status, persuaded the duke's barber to kill his employer by dripping poison into his ear. The dramatic nature of the crime helped the story spread throughout Europe and years later gave Shakespeare inspiration for *Hamlet's* plot.

Much of Shakespeare's life was spent in either Stratford or London. His childhood, early married life, and later years were centered in Stratford, but his theatrical life was based in London.

By 1592 he had established himself in London and found success as both actor and playwright with the company Lord Strange's Men. During the plague outbreaks that shut down many public theaters, Shakespeare joined a new company, Lord Chamberlain's Men (later called the King's Men). This company was one of two well-known London companies. The group performed primarily at the Globe Theater—often for Queen Elizabeth I and later for King James I. Eventually, Shakespeare would own a share of the theater and would remain with both the company and the theater for the rest of his career.

Shakespeare died in April 1616. Some sources list the date as April 23, but others consider that date a guess, romanticized by the idea that he was born and died on the same day. More than four centuries later, his writing remains one of literature's greatest influences—read, performed, referenced, and enjoyed by people of all ages in countries all over the world.

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