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**‘What a piece of
work is a man’**



The life of William Shakespeare

Shakespeare had no biographer in his lifetime and what we do know about him has been cobbled together from a scattering of documents or inferred from his writing. He was born to John Shakespeare, a glover and later a bailiff, and his wife Mary, in Stratford-upon-Avon on or around 23 April 1564. It is presumed that as a son of a prominent local citizen he would have attended the nearby King’s Free Grammar School to receive lessons in Latin and Greek.

Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway in 1582, when he was aged eighteen and she was twenty-six and expecting the first of their three children. This age difference and the fact that Anne was already pregnant has led some to wonder if it was a ‘shotgun wedding’ forced by the Hathaway family.

Documents from the Episcopal Register at Worcester record the issuing of a wedding licence to a ‘Wm Shaxpere’ and an ‘Annam Whateley’. The following day’s entry shows that Hathaway relatives from Stratford signed a surety of £40 to guarantee the wedding of a ‘William Shagspere’ to ‘Anne Hathwey’ – one biographer, Frank Harris, claims that rather than just poor spelling, this is to be taken as evidence that Shakespeare was involved with two women – and wanted to marry the former but was forced to take the latter. Either way, Miss Hathaway became Mrs Shakespeare in November 1582 and their first child, Susanna, was born six months later. The

couple then had twins, Hamnet and Judith, in February 1585, though of the two only Judith survived to adulthood.

After the birth of the twins little is known about Shakespeare's life until he shows up again in 1592. As a consequence, the period between 1585 and 1592 has become known as Shakespeare's 'lost years'. However, it is safe to assume that he moved to London in the mid to late 1580s and became established enough in the theatre by 1592 for fellow dramatist Robert Greene in his *Groat's Worth of Wit* to call him: 'an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers ... supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you; and, being an absolute Johannes factotum [Jack of all trades], is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country.'

The playwright

Throughout the 1590s and the first decade of the seventeenth century, Shakespeare enjoyed great success as a playwright. His company performed first before Queen Elizabeth I and then her successor, James I (James VI of Scotland), many times. Shakespeare acted too – though it is assumed he largely took minor roles.

His company started off as the Chamberlain's Men, performing mainly at The Theatre in Shoreditch, London's first public theatre. It then moved into the newly built Globe Theatre in Southwark in 1599, which was owned by the company members, including Shakespeare, as shareholders. Under the royal patronage of James I, Shakespeare's theatre company became known as the King's Men and performed