

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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SHAKESPEARE

(1564—1616)

Works. (dramatic)

Henry VI Part 1. 1589
Henry VI Part 2. 1590
Henry VI Part 3. 1590
Richard III. 1592
The Comedy of Errors. 1592
Titus Andronicus. 1593
The Taming of the Shrew. 1593
The Two Gentlemen of Verona. 1594
Love's Labors Lost. 1594
Romeo and Juliet. 1594
Richard II. 1595
A Midsummer Night's Dream. 1595
King John. 1596
The Merchant of Venice. 1596
Henry IV Part I. 1597
Henry IV Part 2. 1597
Much Ado about Nothing. 1598
Henry V. 1598
Julius Caesar. 1599
As you like It. 1599
Twelfth Night. 1599
Hamlet. 1600
The Merry Wives of Windsor. 1600
Troilus and Cressida. 1601
All's Well that Ends Well. 1602
Measure for Measure. 1604
Othello. 1604
King Lear. 1605
Macbeth. 1605
Antony and Cleopatra. 1606
Coriolanus. 1607
Timon of Athens. 1607
Pericles. 1608
Cymbeline. 1609
The Winter's Tale. 1610
The Tempest. 1611
Henry VIII. 1612
The Two Noble Kinsmen. 1612

Biography

Shakespeare was the son of a leather merchant; his mother was of the landed gentry. We know virtually nothing of Shakespeare's early life or education.

In 1582, at the age of 18, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, who was eight years his senior. They had three children, a boy who died when he was ten, and two daughters, who lived into their sixties and seventies respectively.

From 1586-1592 Shakespeare hardly exists on record. He disappears from public sight? Was he a poacher on the run? A village schoolmaster? His true production was cooking in him. He was just beginning to get published on the London stage, at the end of this period.

By the decade of the nineties, Shakespeare was living in London, establishing a theater company, creating his first comedies, which by the second half and of the decade he will have shaped into the increasingly romantic comic form we find in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This was the period of *Julius Caesar* and *Romeo and Juliet*. It is noteworthy that throughout this period Shakespeare was acting in his own plays.

By the end of the nineties Shakespeare had written fifteen of his thirty eight plays. He had bought a fine home in his birth place, Stratford, and he had time to spend away from London. He was still, though, on the verge of writing what many think his greatest works, his major tragedies. *Othello*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear* were all composed in the early years of the seventeenth century.

In 1609 Shakespeare's *Sonnets* appeared as a published volume, crowning his complex career. In his last plays, *The Tempest* and *A Winter's Tale*, he turned to tragi-comedies, a new genre for him; in 1613 the Globe Playhouse, where he had long performed and produced, burned down. Shakespeare was near his own end. He died in 1616, at the age of fifty two; arguably from drinking too heavily, and catching a fatal fever.

Achievements

Language. Shakespeare was a genius of the English language, which he inherited at a point at which it was growing, but still raw. His greatest predecessor had been Chaucer, whose *Canterbury Tales* enriched what was still in Chaucer's time (14th century) a language hampered by Latin—rather than freed by it—and underused for literary or imaginative uses. Shakespeare left us with a rare flexible vocabulary, innumerable expressions and proverbs, and endless examples of poetic innovation.

Styles. We can see, from the list of Shakespeare's works, that he was exceptionally versatile. He was a superb writer of sonnets, into whose tight form he could pack all life's pathos. He could write pageants of English or Roman history, light (but brilliant) comedies, and moody profound tragedies, which take the language up to the brink of death.

Comprehensiveness. Shakespeare was able to make us feel the breadth and extent of the whole human experience, from infancy to death, from love to hate, from anxiety to peace. He was his best in juxtaposing these contrasting states of mind, and in inter-fusing black humor and high regal rhetoric in the same scenes of action.

Influence. Shakespeare wrote for the whole world, so that his English has been immeasurable. Each generation of English language writers, for instance, has had its own interpretation of Shakespeare; classicism and Romanticism, in English literature, can pretty well be defined by their exponents' relation to this dramatist. World-wide, Shakespeare will be on stage in several countries, this very night.

Themes

Loss. Shakespeare is always conscious of the 'still sad music of humanity.' That sound pervades his histories of Kings, who are forever lamenting and suffering the ravages of power, and the brevity of life. Shakespeare's tragedies track the fatal passions, self-infatuations, and blighted loves that crop up in the lives of all of us, when we bog down in dilemmas or lose control of our mindfulness.

Rejoicing. Shakespeare's comedies are prone to conclude on unexpected upbeat notes, as long-lost siblings rediscover one another, star-crossed loves find a way out into resolution and harmony, and whimsy and fancy discover that final haven they deserve, a *Midsummer Night's Dream* or *The Tempest*.

Madness. Lear, Hamlet, Richard II, Julius Caesar, Macbeth, Othello: all of these figures spend time in the private hells of their own minds, hopelessly unable to find rational resolutions to the dilemmas life traps them in.

Transience. Shakespeare's comedies dance complexly across their stages, often—as in *All's Well that Ends Well*, or *Much Ado about Nothing*—leaving us with a sense of the rapidly-flitting fever of life, which flashes before us for an instant and then is gone.

Characters

Shakespeare is renowned for the breadth and sharpness with which he renders characters who 'connote' universal human types. It is certainly not that his characters lack distinguishing traits—Shylock, Miranda, Iago are the most idiosyncratic of characters—but that those characters are so sharply 'drawn to life' that we would recognize them anywhere.

Five characters from Shakespeare's *Tempest* press for our attention: Prospero, Ferdinand, Miranda, Ariel, and the half-beast Caliban. Each is the product of high fantasy—the imagination working freely over representative individuals. Prospero is a magician, fanciful, vengeful, unpredictable; his daughter Miranda is as innocent and open as the first day of creation; Ferdinand, Miranda's oncoming lover, and the first man in her life, is crisp and positive, love at its male inception, innocent and ignorant but boiling with anticipation: three characters, these, bearing essentially human traits, but at such a pitch of fancy that they gesture toward infinite personal realms. Ariel and Caliban, for their part, are like two poles of Shakespeare's imagination—the aerial and mercurial, with all its mischief, and the grunting, bellicose gait of Caliban, beast more than man. What marks even Shakespeare's creations of fancy, like Ariel and Caliban, is that they reach out to elements and potentials of human being as it essentially is.

Shakespeare connotes the universal through the fine hue of his imagination; though his characters stay with us, and enter our daily lives, we would not want to call Shakespeare a realist—we cannot, for instance, summarize his tales—and yet when it comes to the large picture vision that encompasses his reality, we realize he is unparalleled in his breadth of understanding of the human. Shakespeare moves in brilliant imaginative surges to figures like Hamlet and Lear, who make us gasp with their representations of dilemma and terror, to Cordelia, whose 'day of honesty' to her father moves mountains and principalities, to Lady Macbeth and her husband, who climb the shaky ladder of violent ambition until it is too steep and destructive for them. We might say that Shakespeare takes chances, with the creations of imagination, while constructing a world in which universality-connoting figures careen and intersect.