

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1564-1616)

1. Youth (1564-85).

- a. Married Anne Hathaway and had three children with, but left Anne in 1585.
- b. We have no record of him between 1585 and 1592, when we find him an actor in London.

2. Development (1592-95).

- a. By 1591, he began writing plays at the rate of almost two per year—about thirty-six in all.

- (1) Henry VI, Part 2 (1590–1591)
- (2) Henry VI, Part 3 (1590–1591)
- (3) Henry VI, Part 1 (1591–1592)
- (4) Richard III (1592-1593)
- (5) The Comedy of Errors (1592-1593)
- (6) Titus Andronicus (1593-1594)
- (7) The Taming of the Shrew (1593-1594)
- (8) The Two Gentlemen of Verona (1594-1595)
- (9) Love's Labour's Lost (1594-1595)



- b. Poems and sonnets.

- (1) *Sonnets* (1593)(154 in all).

- (a) “Technically the most nearly perfect of Shakespeare’s works, they borrow heavily from the Petrarchan treasury of sonnet themes—the transitory beauty of the beloved, her cruel hesitations and inconstancy, the dreary crawl of unused time, the jealousies and the panting thirst of the lover, and the poet’s boast that in his rhymes the lady’s loveliness and fame would shine forever.”¹

- (b) Especially see *Sonnets* 18, 29-30, 33, 55, 64, 66, 71, 97, 106, 117).

- (2) *Venus and Adonis* (1593).
- (3) *The Rape of Lucretia* (1594).

- c. He was influenced by:

- (1) Plutarch (d. []).
- (2) Ovid (d. []).
- (3) Petrarch (d. []).
- (4) Christopher Marlowe (d. []).

3. Mastery (1595-1613).

- a. Note: Shakespeare wrote comedies, histories, and tragedies.
- b. *Romeo and Juliet (1594-1595)
- c. *Richard II (1595-1596)
- d. A Midsummer Night's Dream (1595-1596)
- e. *King John* (1596-1597)
- f. The Merchant of Venice (1596-1597)
 - (1) This play has an antisemitic tinge.

¹ Will and Ariel Durant, *The Age of Reason Begins*, 129.

- g. *Henry IV, Part 1 (1597-1598)
(1) The character Falstaff is a perennial favourite.
- h. *Henry IV, Part 2 (1597-1598)
- i. Much Ado About Nothing (1598-1599)
- j. *Henry V (1598-1599)
- k. *Julius Caesar (1599-1600)
- l. *As You Like It (1599-1600)
(1) After this play, Shakespeare turned primarily to tragedy.
- m. Twelfth Night (1599-1600)
- n. *Hamlet (1600-1601)
- o. The Merry Wives of Windsor (1600-1601)
- p. Troilus and Cressida (1601-1602)
- q. The Phoenix and the Turtle (1601)
- r. All's Well That Ends Well (1602-1603)
(1) Elizabeth I died and was succeeded by James I in 1603.
- s. Measure for Measure (1604-1605)
- t. *Othello (1604-1605)
- u. *King Lear (1605-1606)
- v. *Macbeth (1605-1606)
- w. Antony and Cleopatra (1606-1607)
- x. Coriolanus (1607-1608)
- y. Timon of Athens (1607-1608)
(1) This is his most pessimistic play.
- z. Pericles, Prince of Tyre (1608-1609)
- aa. Cymbeline (1609-1610)
- bb. The Winter's Tale (1610-1611)
- cc. *The Tempest (1611-1612)
- dd. Henry VIII (1612-1613)
- ee. The Two Noble Kinsmen (1612-1613)
- ff. Shakespeare became rich enough to join in financing the Globe theatre and the Blackfriars, and purchasing New Place in Stratford, his hometown.
- gg. He retired from London to Stratford in 1610.

4. Artistry.

- a. His biblical references are incidental and ordinary, and his classical learning was casual and careless.
- b. “The originality is in the language, the style, the imagination, the dramatic technique, the humor, the characters, and the philosophy. The language is the richest in all literature: fifteen thousand words, including the technical terms of heraldry, music, sports, and the professions, the dialects of the shires, the argot of the pavement, and a thousand hurried or lazy inventions—occulted, unkenneled, fumitory, burnet, spurring... He relished words and explored the nooks and crannies of the language; he loved words in general and poured them forth in frolicsome abandon; if he names a flower he must go on to name a dozen—the words themselves are fragrant.”²

² Will and Ariel Durant, *The Age of Reason Begins*, 137-38.

- c. “Observation, feeling, empathy, astonishing receptivity of senses, penetrating perception, alert selection of significant and characteristic detail, tenacious remembering, come together to people this living city of dead or imagined souls. Play after play these personae grow in reality, complexity, and depth, until, in Hamlet and Lear, the poet matures into a philosopher and his dramas become the glowing vehicles of thought.”³

5. Worldview.

- a. “...[W]e may accept that judgment as Bernard Shaw meant it—that there is no metaphysics in Shakespeare, no view as to the ultimate nature of reality, no theory of God. ...He stands aside and watches the dogmatists destroy one another or disintegrate in the catalysis of time. He hides himself in his characters and is hard to find; we must beware of attributing an opinion to him unless it is expressed with some emphasis by at least two of his creations. He is at first sight more of a psychologist than a philosopher; but again not as a theorist but, rather, as a mental photographer, catching the secret thoughts and symptomatic actions that reveal the nature of a man. However, he is no surface realist; things do not happen, people do not speak, in life as in his plays; but in the sum we feel that through these improbabilities and extravagances we are nearing the core of human instinct and thought. ...If we interpret philosophy not as metaphysics but as any large perspective of human affairs, as a generalized view not only of the cosmos and the mind but as well of morals, politics, history, and faith, Shakespeare is a philosopher, profounder than Bacon, as Montaigne is deeper than Descartes; it is not form that makes philosophy.”⁴
- b. His own ethic is one of Aristotelian measure and Stoic self-control. Reason is not enough; a stoic fibre must strengthen it. He welcomes Epicurus, admitting no inherent contradiction between pleasure and wisdom. He snaps at the Puritans, and his political philosophy is conservative. He smiles utopias away as impossible because of the nature of man.
- c. He and his children were baptised according to Anglican rites, and some faith in God survives his tragedies, but there is a spreading cloud of unbelief in life itself (see Jaques “seven ages” from *As You Like It*).

Out, out, brief candle!
Life’s but a walking shadow; a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.⁵

6. Legacy.

- a. He took no steps to have his plays published. The famous First Folio was published in 1623.

³ Will and Ariel Durant, *The Age of Reason Begins*, 141.

⁴ Will and Ariel Durant, *The Age of Reason Begins*, 141-42.

⁵ *Macbeth*.

- b. Ben Jonson rated Shakespeare above all other dramatists ancient or modern.
- c. He was praised by John Milton (d. []), John Dryden (d. []), Alexander Pope (d. []), Samuel Johnson (d. []), and especially by the romantic movement led by Samuel Coleridge (d. []), William Hazlitt (d. []), and Charles Lamb (d. []).
- d. France, including Voltaire (d. []), preferred [] Corneille and [] Racine (d. []).
- e. Germany adored him, especially Gotthold Lessing (d. []), [] Herder (d. []), and [] Goethe (d. []).
- f. “For those brought up in the aura of Shakespeare an objective estimate or comparison is impossible. Only one who knows the language, the religion, the art, the customs, and the philosophy of the Periclean Greeks will feel the unequaled dignity of the Dionysian tragic drama, the stark simplicity and inexorable logic of its structure, its proud self-restraint in word and deed, the moving commentary of its choral chants, the high enterprise of seeing man in the perspective of his cosmic place and destiny. Only one who knows the French language and character, and the background of the grand siècle, can feel, in the plays of Corneille and Racine, not merely the majesty and music of their verse, but as well the heroic effort of reason to overspread emotion and impulse, the stoic adherence to difficult classic norms, the concentration of the drama into a few tense hours summarizing and deciding lives. Only one who knows English in its Elizabethan fullness, who can ride with gusto the Elizabethan winds of rhetoric, lyric, and vituperation, who puts no bounds to the theater’s mirroring of nature and release of imagination, can bring to Shakespeare’s plays their merited acceptance with open arms and heart; but such a man will tremble with delight at the splendor of their speech, and he will be moved to the depths of his spirit to follow and fathom their thought. These are the three epochal gifts of the world’s drama, and we must, despite our limitations, welcome them all to our deepening, thanking our heritage for Greek wisdom, French beauty, and Elizabethan life. (But, of course, Shakespeare is supreme.)”⁶

⁶ Will and Ariel Durant, *The Age of Reason Begins*, 151-52.

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