

# Shakespeare Shorts

## Performing Arts Series

Grades 2-4

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# A Brief Shakespeare Biography for Teachers

William Shakespeare lived in a tempestuous time in England's history. When he was born, in 1564, Queen Elizabeth I was on the throne, and England was locked in a firm debate over religion, specifically Roman Catholic versus Protestant, with the result often being violence and execution. The expansion of England's influence around the world had also begun, as explorers such as Sir Francis Drake sailed to far away lands. And as England looked outward, other powers, notably Spain, attempted to check this growing expansion with plans for invasion. At the time of Shakespeare's death, in 1616, James I was on the throne, and his rule was proving unpopular with many groups in English society.

Throughout this period, Shakespeare wrote both plays and poetry that are remembered above the events of the day. And yet, even with this remarkable body of work, we know very little about Shakespeare himself.

Born in Stratford-Upon-Avon, in 1564, the son of a glove maker, John Shakespeare, and his wife, Mary Arden, little remains other than the house in which he was born to tell us of his early years. Educated at the local grammar school, Shakespeare later married Anne Hathaway, a much older woman. They had three children, Susanna, Judith, and Hamnet. Hamnet, his only son, died at the age of eleven. Their marriage appears not to have been a happy one, which might explain why William left for London to find work, and his family remained behind.

In London, Shakespeare acted in several plays, and eventually began writing plays of his own. His plays were rarely original in their conception, often borrowing heavily from other texts. However, in their final form, their use of language, poetry, and a keen insight into human nature, elevated them beyond the other works of his day. Some have even suggested that Shakespeare, with his meager education, was incapable of writing such timeless and thought-provoking works.

Shakespeare wrote four basic kinds of plays: tragedies, comedies, histories, and, what have been called by various names, romances or problem plays. Shakespeare's tragedies are plays in which the hero, or main character, comes to a tragic end because of a flaw in his or her personality, or because of other forces acting on the character which cause the tragedy. Comedies are plays involving humorous situations, mistaken identities, and hilarious turns on figures of speech. They usually end well for all involved, often in a wedding. The history plays were based on great figures from history, and, artistic license aside, are reasonably accurate portrayals of their period. Some, however, portrayed certain historical figures in a negative light, to reflect the prevailing politics of Shakespeare's day. The problem plays, or romances, are often adventurous stories involving difficult problems with interesting resolutions.

Shakespeare is remembered today for the breadth and scope of his work, and also for the subtleties of character and human nature that pervade each play or poem. His influence upon later authors, and the arts in general, is profound, and the rich language and turns of phrase that he coined are used even to this day.

# All about William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare is famous for the poems and plays that he wrote. We remember him today, more than 440 years after he was born!



William Shakespeare was born on April 23, 1564, in the town of Stratford-Upon-Avon, in England. His wife's name was Anne Hathaway, and he had three children named Susanna, Judith, and Hamnet. Unfortunately, Hamnet died when he was only eleven years old.

One day, Shakespeare moved to London, England, and began to write plays. His family remained in Stratford-Upon-Avon. Some of his plays were about famous people from history, some were about war, some were about romance, and some were comedies. He often acted in his own plays!

In Shakespeare's time, actors wore interesting costumes, a few wore masks, and they used some props, like guns or swords. If you were an actor working with Shakespeare, you might have been a king, a soldier, a witch, a fairy, or a ghost. Only men and boys could be in the plays, because people in Shakespeare's day thought it was rude for a woman or a girl to be in a play. Since girls were not allowed, boys got to play the parts of the ladies!

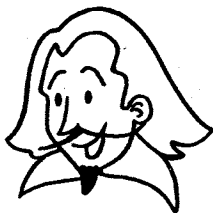
One of the theaters Shakespeare worked in was called The Globe. It could hold 3 000 people, and was a theater without a roof! Rich people sat on benches in a covered area, but most people stood on the floor and watched the plays. The people who stood were called groundlings, and if it rained, they got wet!

Shakespeare returned to Stratford-Upon-Avon when he was much older, after a fire burned The Globe Theatre to the ground. He died when he was 52, on his birthday, April 23, in 1616. When he died, he was very famous.

We remember him today because he wrote plays that continue to mean a lot to us. Plays like *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are still performed everywhere, because people like to hear the ideas and words that Shakespeare wrote, and because he told stories about the feelings that people have always had.

# Illustrated Vocabulary

William Shakespeare



Stratford-Upon-Avon

London

England

Anne Hathaway



Susanna



Judith



Hamnet



Queen Elizabeth I



plays

poetry

comedy



tragedy



# Illustrated Vocabulary

actor



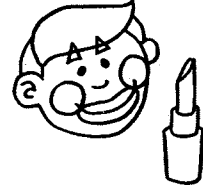
actress



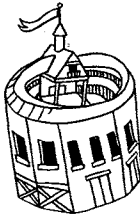
costume



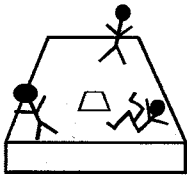
make-up



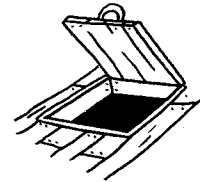
The Globe Theatre



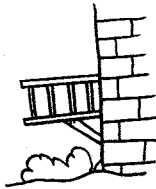
stage



trapdoor

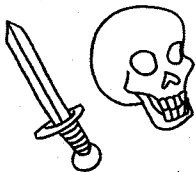


balcony



performance

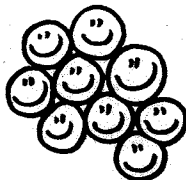
props



script



audience



groundling

