

Shakespeare

Who was he?

William Shakespeare is recognised by most people as the greatest dramatist and poet in the English language. His plays have retained their place in the centre of literary culture throughout the world, demonstrating their astonishing depth of human understanding and ability to illuminate experience across centuries in which ideas about life and society have undergone huge changes, and theatre practice has moved into different media and environments.

Shakespeare is an enigma, in that very little is known about the facts of his life. He was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire in 1564 and grew up there, marrying Anne Hathaway in 1582 when he was eighteen and she was twenty-six. They had three children – Susannah born in 1583, and Hamnet and Judith (twins) in 1585. It is believed that he travelled to London around the mid-1580s where he worked as an actor and writer for the Lord Chamberlain’s Men (later known as the King’s Men). He was a co-owner of the Globe Theatre, built in 1599. Around 1613 he returned to Stratford and retired, dying there in 1616.

Recent scholarship has sought to fill in the gaps in this biography, but this can only ever be conjecture, however thoroughly researched, as there is very little surviving evidence, although a wealth of legend and hearsay. There is also a thriving academic argument about whether or not the William Shakespeare we know existed actually wrote the plays. This debate, which began in the eighteenth century and has flourished in recent years, has suggested several possible alternative candidates. Edward de Vere, seventeenth Earl of Oxford (1550-1604), courtier, poet and playwright, none of whose works survive, and who is currently the most popular candidate, Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593), the most famous dramatist of Shakespeare’s time, whose works include ‘Tamburlaine the Great’ and ‘Dr Faustus’ or Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626), the philosopher, diplomat and statesman whose works include ‘The Wisdom of the Ancients’ among others. This argument controversially suggests that because of Shakespeare’s working class origins and lack of education, it would be unlikely that he could have produced plays displaying such a range of vocabulary and breadth of knowledge. Whoever the author of the plays, they are unsurpassed in his dramatic genius and mastery of language to convey an extraordinary range and depth of expression.