

An Illustrated Biography of  
William Shakespeare  
by  
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William Shakespeare is the most celebrated English playwright in history and the best-selling author of all time, with book sales estimated between two and four billion.

Though his literary success occurred in Tudor era London, the author was buried (1616) in his hometown of Stratford, the previously unremarkable market town where he was born (1564). He achieved some level of social and financial success before his death, yet Shakespeare's legend began to form after his demise.

Initially there was limited interest in the author and little effort was made to preserve biographical information about Shakespeare, his family and his hometown. However these topics would later become the foundations of lucrative industries.

The public's attention was drawn to the deceased author in 1709 when England's Poet Laureate, Nicholas Rowe, published the first 18<sup>th</sup> century edition of Shakespeare's plays. The six illustrated volumes contained biographical information about the deceased author.

Shakespeare had been associated with London's Globe Theatre. Yet Rowe's book became the first to express a reverence for "Shakespeare country," which included the villages of Stratford and Shottery in the county of Warwickshire.

With the onset of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, national industrialization and environmental destruction began to transform the English countryside. The historical novels of Sir Walter Scott were eagerly read by Victorians who harkened to the past and had a growing reverence for nature.

A book entitled *The Home and Haunts of Shakespeare*, published in 1892, contained photographs that depicted the pathways, cottages and rural landmarks where Shakespeare was born, courted his wife, lived and died.

Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and President Ulysses S. Grant were among the horde of tourists who made the

pilgrimage to Stratford. Thousands of other tourists visited nearby Shuttery, where Anne Hathaway's cottage had been transformed into a shrine of romance.

Realizing the potential lucrative income that could be derived from the influx of tourists, the [Shakespeare Birthplace Trust](#) was formed in 1847.

To assuage the yearnings of these devotees, Victorians created a fictive romantic story about Shakespeare's life. The playwright became the central figure of a literary mythology which enshrined places and invented events.

Charles Cattermole (1832 - 1900) was one of a number of Victorian artists whose popular paintings portrayed scenes from Britain's historical past. To accompany a lecture about Stratford's most famous son, William Ryland commissioned Cattermole to paint thirteen scenes depicting Shakespeare's life.

These watercolours, each of which measures 23.5 X 13 inches, illustrate Shakespeare's life from his Christening to his death and helped influence the modern perception of "who" William Shakespeare was.

As a consequence, millions of tourists visit Shakespeare's birthplace, Stratford-Upon-Avon, every year, which results in £600 million flowing into the local economy.

The Cattermole paintings not only provide a chronological framework of events, they also include references to the people who influenced Shakespeare's life and depict significant locations in the playwright's existence.



*The Christening of Shakespeare*

John Shakespeare was a glove maker and a successful businessman who served as Stratford's mayor. His wife, Mary Arden, came from a rich farming family. William, the first of their seven children and the oldest son, is baptized on 26 April, 1564. The artist depicted the church with the avenue of lime trees along the road.



*Shakespeare Meets the Strolling Players*

William attended the King's New School until the age of 14, where he received an education based on Latin and the Classics. In this scene young Shakespeare encounters a troupe of actors who are travelling through the Warwickshire countryside.



### *Stag-Hunting by Moonlight*

One of the unresolved mysteries surrounding Shakespeare's life concerns the story that he was caught poaching deer at Charlecote Park, an estate situated four miles from his home in Stratford.



### *Shakespeare Before Sir Thomas Lucy*

Charlecote Estate belonged to Sir Thomas Lucy, a Protestant Member of Parliament who came into conflict with Shakespeare's Catholic relatives. This scene depicts Sir Thomas, the local magistrate, sitting in judgment at Charlecote Hall, where he is about to have the young offender punished.



### *Mayday Sports at Shuttery*

Upon her father's death in 1581, Anne Hathaway inherited the family farm and large home located in the village of Shuttery, a mile west of Stratford. Anne's role in Shakespeare's life is the subject of robust debate. Cattermole's illustration depicts Shakespeare at Hathaway's cottage in an invented courtship scene. This image was important to the Victorians, who had trouble reconciling Shakespeare's marriage at eighteen to a woman eight years his senior and who was pregnant when they married. The Hathaway cottage became an icon commemorating the couple's romance.



### *Shakespeare Leaving Home--The Farewell*

Although his place of birth is not disputed, Shakespeare's family had historical links with Prescott, a town further north in Lancashire. Prior to moving south to Stratford, William's grandfather Richard spelled his surname Shakeshafte. The spelling of the family name may have influenced William Shakespeare's married life. After learning

of Anne's pregnancy, the young couple only had a few weeks to be married before the onset of December, during which time marriages were not performed. Some scholars have argued that Alexander Hoghton of Lancashire left a sum of money to "William Shakeshafte" and that it was this unexpected financial bequest that allowed the couple to wed in time. William and Anne were married in haste on November 27, 1582. Their first child, Susanna, was born six months later. In 1585 Anne gave birth to twins, Hamlet and Judith. To support his family, Shakespeare may have been employed as a teacher or started work in the theatre. The date of his departure from Stratford to London is unknown. This is the first image of Shakespeare in the saddle and the artist depicts the family standing on Clopton Bridge which spans the river Avon.



*Ben Jonson Visits Shakespeare in London*

One of the mysteries concerning Shakespeare is how he spent "the lost years" (1585-92) before he is mentioned as taking part in the London theatre. Some scholars have speculated that Shakespeare was employed as a teacher by wealthy Catholic families residing in Lancashire. His friend Ben Johnson believed this explained Shakespeare's knowledge of Latin. Others have suggested that Shakespeare travelled to Italy during this mysterious time in his life, which would explain why a third of his plays are set in that country and include details about cities, bridges, weather and the trees found there.



### *Shakespeare in the Green Room*

Records confirm that Shakespeare was working in London as an actor and playwright in 1592. He was unlike other Elizabethan and Stuart dramatists, who were from London or had attended university. Yet his plays, especially comedies such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, drew huge audiences. Scholars speculate that the death of his 11-year-old son may have been one of the inspirations for his famous tragedy, *Hamlet*. There have been questions regarding the spelling of the child's name. "Thus the stranglehold of academic consensus has silenced common sense in so many aspects of Shakespeare studies throughout most of this century."



### *Shakespeare Acting Before Queen Elizabeth*

A distinct contrast is now apparent. One of London's most famous citizens is intensely private. Shakespeare was among the men who created the Globe Theatre on the south bank of the Thames river in 1599. This is an enormously productive time in his life when many of his most famous plays, including *Julius Caesar* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, are written. He is a leading member of the acting troupe, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, and his plays are enjoyed by royalty and commoners alike. With a few exceptions, Shakespeare did not invent the plots of his plays, relying on historical events and previously published books. Though his enormous vocabulary was evident, and his scholarship profound, the playwright baffles scholars by his reticence to reveal details about his private life or personal affairs.



### *Shakespeare Reading The Merry Wives of Windsor to Queen Elizabeth*

The artist depicts Shakespeare performing before Queen Elizabeth aboard her royal row barge. Despite the nautical setting, the fate of the play's famous character, Falstaff, is linked to his horse. Shakespeare's knowledge of horses, their training, equipment and theft is so extensive that in 1877 Charles Flowers wrote the first equestrian study of the playwright. "Shakespeare not only looked on a horse with the eye of a judge, but he entertained for him a feeling of affection which is exhibited through all the plays and poems. He knew well there must be for perfect training an intimate sympathy between the horse and his rider, so that the one can instantly feel the intention of the other, even before it can be expressed by word or sign."



### *Shakespeare's Return to Stratford-upon-Avon*

The death of Queen Elizabeth in 1603 ushers in her successor, King James, who was such a strong supporter of Shakespeare's plays that the troupe of actors changed their name to the King's Men and performed before the royal court eleven times in a year. With the wealth made by his plays, Shakespeare retires at the age of 49. He purchases New Place, the second largest home in Stratford, and resumes living in the village where his wife and married daughters had been living all the while. He is respected by prominent people in London and is granted a coat of arms, which he displays with pride at home.



### *Shakespeare with His Friends at New Place*

The artist chose to depict Shakespeare entertaining his friends in the shade of a legendary black mulberry tree which the playwright is believed to have planted in front of his home, after King James encouraged the planting of these trees in an attempt to induce landowners to start a silk industry in England. While the origin of this specific tree may be in question, what is remembered is that this tree is connected to the destruction of Shakespeare's home. New Place was inhabited in 1756 by the Reverend Francis Gastrell. Having grown tired of visitors constantly asking to view the tree, Gastrell ordered the mulberry to be cut down in what was described as an act of gothic barbarity. The inhabitants of Stratford were incandescent. When Gastrell requested permission to extend the garden, the town council refused and raised his taxes. In retaliation Gastrell promptly demolished Shakespeare's home. Outraged residents forced the reverend to leave the town and the legend of Shakespeare's mulberry tree gave birth to a cottage industry which created souvenirs supposedly made from the fabled tree.



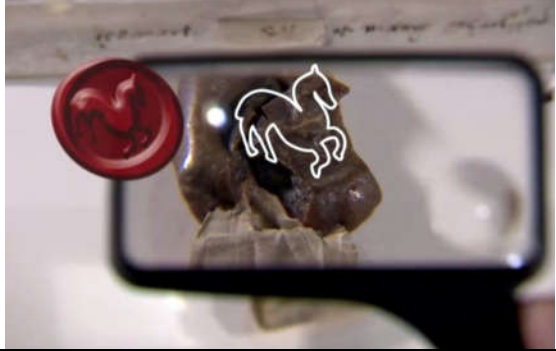
### *Shakespeare's Last Hours*

The cause of Shakespeare's death has never been determined. He died on April 23, 1616, which marked his 52<sup>nd</sup> birthday. He is seen being attended by his wife and two daughters. In the background of the painting, the artist depicted the spire of the Holy Trinity Church, the same place where Shakespeare had been baptized and was later buried. Seven years after his death, two colleagues collected 36 of Shakespeare's plays and preserved them in a book known as the First Folio. After Shakespeare's death, his friend Ben Jonson said, "He was not of an age,

	but for all time.” And though questions have been raised as to whether Shakespeare was the author of so many famous plays, there is no credible evidence to prove that anyone else created these great works of literature. Thus more than 400 years after his death, Shakespeare has become a global cultural phenomenon.
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After Cattermole’s death, Ryland bequeathed the original set of watercolours to the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford in 1901. The paintings, which were often reproduced as postcards, can be viewed [here](#).

**Equestrian Epilogue**

	Michael Wood is an English historian who undertook an investigation entitled <a href="#">In Search of Shakespeare</a> . During his search, Professor Wood discovered a rare legal document. Dated 1579, it bears the equestrian wax seal of Shakespeare’s mother, Mary Arden.
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