

# William Shakespeare's Life

by Robert Anderson

**W**e know very little of William Shakespeare's life. In the early years of the 1600s, nobody realized that this actor and writer would one day become known as the world's greatest playwright and poet. In the 1600s, there were no talk show hosts to interview Shakespeare, no Sunday supplements to feature all the intimate details of his life. This neglect, however, has been corrected in the past few hundred years. By now, more material has been written about Shakespeare and his works than about any other writer in the world.

What we do know about Shakespeare comes mainly from public records. We know that he was baptized on April 26, 1564, in Stratford-on-Avon, a market town about one hundred miles northwest of London. It is assumed he was born a few days before his baptism, and so, his birthday is celebrated on April 23, possibly only because he died on that date in 1616. He was one of eight children.

His father, John Shakespeare, sold gloves and other commodities in Stratford and was a man of some importance in the town, serving at various times as alderman and "high bailiff"—the equivalent of a mayor today.

William went to the local grammar school, which was very different from grammar schools today. In those days it was rare for



William Shakespeare.

Popperfoto/Archive Photos.



Shakespeare's  
birthplace on  
Henly Street  
in Stratford,  
England.

The Photo Works/  
Photo Researchers.



students to move on to a university; the Stratford grammar school provided Shakespeare and other boys of Stratford (no girls went to school) with all their formal education. And what they learned in this school was Latin—Latin grammar and Latin literature, including the schoolboys' favorite—Ovid's amorous retelling of the Greek and Roman myths.

In 1582, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, who was eight years older than he was, and in 1583, their first child, Susanna, was born. In 1585, Anne gave birth to twins, Hamnet and Judith. Then, from 1585 until 1592, Shakespeare's history goes blank.

Many people believe that Shakespeare went to London to seek his fortune the year after the twins were born. We know that by 1592 he had become an actor and a playwright because that year a rival playwright, Robert Greene, scathingly warned other playwrights against the actor who had become a writer:

There is an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers . . . that supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you. . . .

Greene refers to a fable in which a crow struts about in another bird's feathers—as an actor can only recite others' words. Greene was insulting an upstart, a mere actor who dared to *write*.

Actors were held in disrepute at the time.

In fact, they were often lumped together with other unsavory groups: "rogues, vagabonds, sturdy beggars, and common players." Local officials frequently tried to close the theaters because they felt clerks and apprentices wasted time there (performances were in the daytime). They also felt that disease was too easily spread

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among the audience members. In fact, the London theaters were closed for long periods during the plague years of 1592-1594.

Thus, actors sought the protection and support of noblemen with the power to speak for their rights against critical town authorities. In 1594, it appears that Shakespeare became a charter member of a theatrical group called the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which became the King's Men in 1603. (The patron of the group was none other than King James himself.) Shakespeare acted and wrote for this company until he retired to Stratford in 1612. By that time, he had written thirty-seven plays—comedies, histories, tragedies, and romances—including his tragic masterpieces *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*.

It is sometimes difficult to fix the dates of Shakespeare's works because plays were not routinely published after production as they generally are now. In Shakespeare's day, plays became the property of the theaters, and the theaters were not eager to have copies made available for rival theaters to use. Some of Shakespeare's plays were published during his lifetime but often in versions of dubious authenticity. It was not until 1623 that two men who had been with Shakespeare in the King's Men brought out what they called "True Originall Copies" of all the plays. This volume is called the First Folio.

It is believed that *Julius Caesar* was written in 1599, because a Swiss traveler who was in England in September 1599 wrote about a visit to the Globe. The Swiss visitor was most impressed, for good reason, with the intricate and vigorous Elizabethan dancing:

After dinner on the twenty-first of September, at about two o'clock, I went with my companions over the water, and in the strewn-roof house [the playhouse with a thatched roof] saw the tragedy of the first Emperor Julius with at least fifteen characters very well acted. At the end of the comedy they danced according to their custom with extreme elegance. Two men in men's clothes and two in women's gave this performance, in wonderful combination with each other.

Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616, at the age of fifty-two. He was buried in the Holy Trinity Church at Stratford, where his grave can still be seen today. A bequest he made in his will has attracted almost as much interest and curiosity as anything in his plays—he left his wife his "second-best bed."



Glenn Close in the 1990 movie version of *Hamlet*, starring Mel Gibson.



# The Elizabethan Stage

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The Elizabethan stage would have seemed very strange to American theatergoers of fifty or sixty years ago, who were accustomed to elaborate and realistic settings placed on a stage separated from the audience by a huge velvet curtain. This is called a proscenium stage, and though it's still more or less standard today, the newer arena stages, thrust stages, and open stages have made us much more at home with Shakespeare's theater. The use of these simpler stages that make the audience feel they're a part of the action recalls the saying that all you need for a theater is "a platform and a passion or two."



The White  
Hart Inn,  
London.  
Engraving.

From the Collection  
of The Folger  
Shakespeare Library,  
Washington, D.C.

As with Shakespeare's life, we have only sketchy information about the early English theaters. It appears that the wandering acting companies in England had originally set up their stages—mere platforms—wherever they could find space, often in the courtyards of inns. The audience stood around three sides of the stage, or if they paid more, they sat in chairs on the balconies surrounding the inn yard.

When James Burbage (the father of Richard Burbage, the actor who was to perform most of Shakespeare's great tragic parts) decided in 1576 to build the first permanent theater just outside the city of London, it was natural that he should duplicate the courtyard theaters in which his company had been performing. Burbage called his new playhouse simply "The Theater."

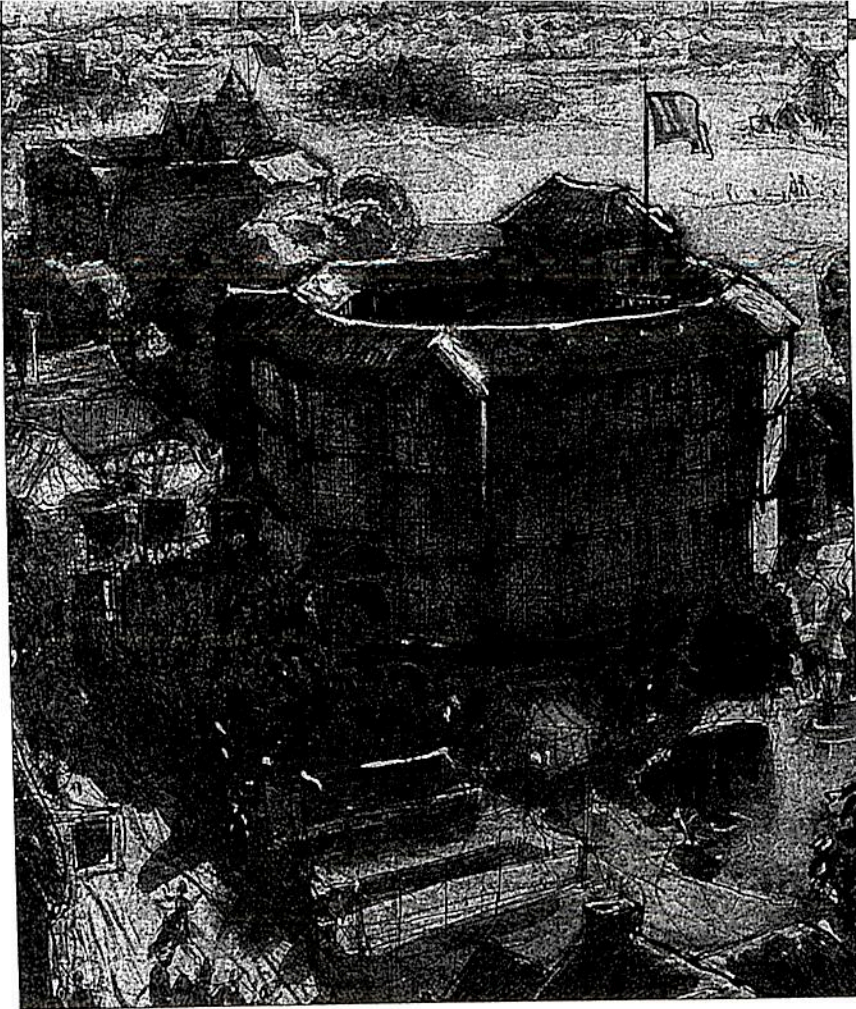
## The Globe—The "Wooden O"

In 1599, the owner of the land on which Burbage had built his theater apparently decided to raise the rent. Because the theater was somewhat behind in its rent payments, the landlord threatened to take it over. On the night of January 20, 1599, James Burbage's son Cuthbert and others in the company stealthily took their theater apart timber by timber and rowed the pieces across the river, where they later re-constructed the theater and called it the Globe. This was the theater where Shakespeare's greatest plays were performed.

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*The Globe Theater, a view of Shoreditch in 1590, by Cyril Walter Hodges. Watercolor with pen, ink, and body color (9" x 6½").*

Courtesy Chris Beetles Ltd., London.

consisted of an open space, perhaps sixty-five feet in diameter, surrounded by a more or less circular building thirty feet high and consisting of three tiers of seats for spectators. As in the inn courtyards, the stage, which was forty feet by thirty feet and five feet off the ground, projected into the open space.

The interesting part of the stage was at the rear, where there was a small curtained inner stage, flanked by two entrances, with an upper stage above it. Stout pillars held up a narrow roof over the rear part of the stage. This was called "the Heavens." The front part of the stage was equipped with a trapdoor, which could be used for burial scenes, surprise entrances, and mysterious exits.

### **The Sets: Mostly Imagination**

Shakespeare trusted his audience's imagination. He knew he did not need elaborate sets to re-create a battle scene or a bedroom or the Roman Forum. The audience members could do it for themselves.



Moreover, without elaborate sets to move on and off the stage, Shakespeare could change scenes with the kind of fluidity we see in movies today.

Here is how Shakespeare prompted his audience to see hundreds of horsemen (and to costume his kings) in lines from the Prologue to *Henry V*:

... let us ...

On your imaginary forces work. ...

Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them

Printing their proud hoofs i' th' receiving earth;

For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings ...

Though Shakespeare made no attempt to use realistic settings, it appears that his kings and other characters were splendidly decked out. He also called for flags and banners and musicians, and the multilayered stage could produce special effects. Characters could be lowered from the Heavens by cranes, and there were sound effects as well. In fact, these special effects caused the destruction of the Globe. In 1613, during the battle scene of *Henry VIII*, a stagehand was lighting the fuse of a cannon. A spark flew up and started a fire in the thatched roof of the Heavens, and the theater burned down.

Because the plays were performed during the daytime in the open air, there was no need for stage illumination. Shakespeare had to convey the idea of night by having characters carry torches. (Today, to shoot a night scene in the daytime, movie directors use filters on their cameras to darken the scene.)

### The Actors: All Males

In Shakespeare's time, all actors were male. (It wasn't until 1660, when the exiled King Charles II was restored to the English throne, and the repressive Puritan dominance ended, that women played in professional theaters.) Boys who had been recruited from the choir schools and trained professionally played the female roles. It was not too difficult to create the illusion that these boys were

women. Shakespeare's plays were performed in contemporary Elizabethan costumes, and women's clothing of the day was very elaborate and concealing, with long, full skirts flowing from extremely narrow waists. Women also wore elaborate wigs and powdered their faces heavily. So, all in all, the transformation of boys into women characters was not that unbelievable.



In yet another reversal of roles, female mezzo-soprano Tatiana Troyanos portrays Caesar in Handel's opera *Julius Caesar*.

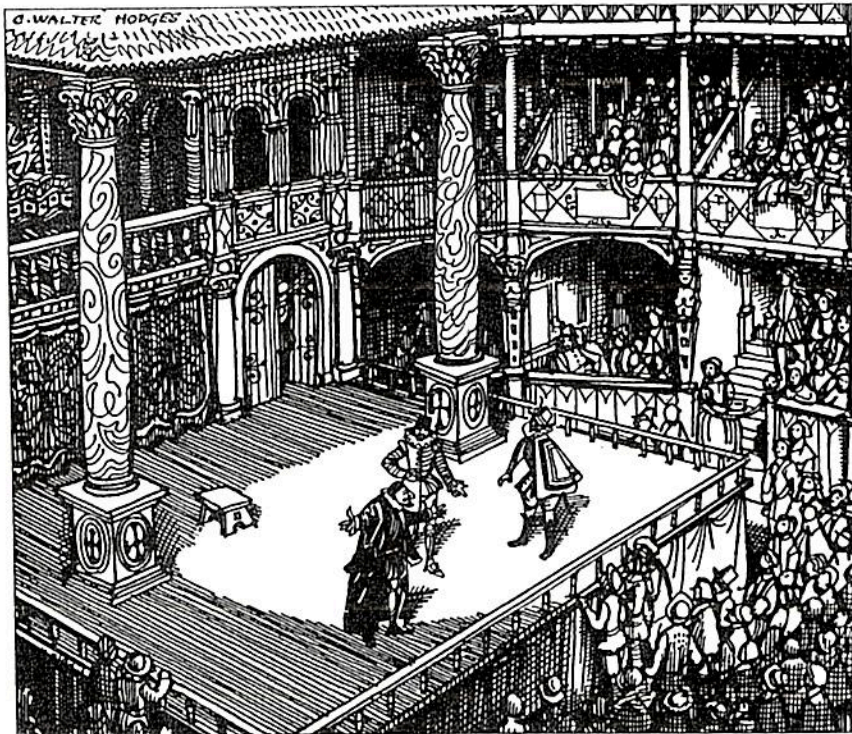
The Bettmann Archive.



## Hooking the Audience's Attention

The Elizabethan theater was a convivial place where people arrived early, visited with friends, made new acquaintances, moved around freely, and ate and drank before and during the performance. (The occasion might have had something of the feeling of a Saturday matinee at a local shopping-mall movie theater.) Playwrights had to write scenes that would catch the attention of this audience, and many actors held their attention by vigorous and flamboyant acting. By comparison, today's movie cameras are so sensitive that sometimes all an actor has to do is think the right thoughts, and that is enough. Elizabethan actors had to do more than that since they were trying to hold the interest of three thousand restless people who were also busy eating, drinking, and talking. We get the impression that, like actors working on modern thrust or arena stages, the Elizabethan players had to keep on the move so that spectators on all three sides could catch their expressions and hear their voices.

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Drawing of a Globe Theater performance.

The Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C.

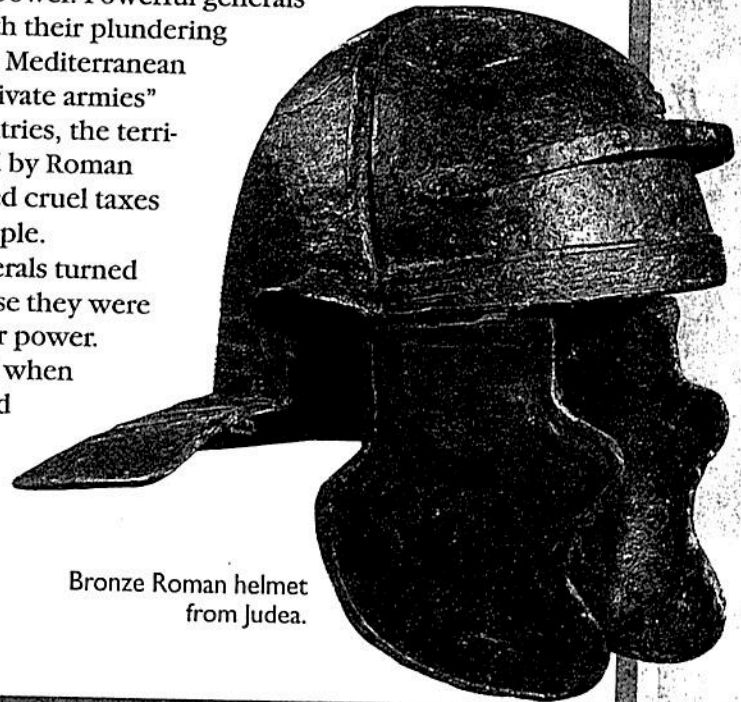
# The Play: The Results of Violence

Assassination. The murder of a public figure is an act that can take place in a split second yet change the course of history. We've seen a number of assassinations in the twentieth century. This play is about the assassination of a Roman general and dictator who lived and died (an extremely violent death) more than two thousand years ago. Shakespeare drew his material from an ancient biographical text called *The Parallel Lives*, which first appeared under the title *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* in translation in England in 1579. This work was written by Plutarch (A.D. 46–c. A.D. 120), a Greek writer and biographer who lived close to the time of Julius Caesar. Greek and Roman history and culture had a great appeal for the English of the Elizabethan Age. They tended to see their own age mirrored in those great ancient civilizations.

## Rome in Caesar's Day: Continuous War

We get the impression that the Roman world in Caesar's time was continually at war. Today, the generals of the United States Army are ultimately responsible to the president, who is their commander-in-chief. But two thousand years ago in Rome, the generals had enormous individual power. Powerful generals like Caesar moved with their plundering armies over the entire Mediterranean world. After these "private armies" subdued weaker countries, the territories were then ruled by Roman governors who exacted cruel taxes on the conquered people.

Sometimes the generals turned on one another, because they were strong men battling for power. This is what happened when the generals Caesar and Pompey clashed in the civil war that began in 49 B.C.



Bronze Roman helmet  
from Judea.



## Caesar and Pompey: Jealousy and Murder

Caesar and Pompey were friends. Pompey married Caesar's daughter by his first wife. In 60 B.C., the two generals helped to bring order to a weakened government, when they, along with Crassus, formed the First Triumvirate (three-man government).

Eager for still more power and realizing that he could only achieve it with conquests and money, Caesar departed for what has been called the Gallic Wars. For eight years, he and his armies roamed Europe, subjugating France, Belgium, and parts of Holland, Germany, and Switzerland. Caesar amassed huge sums of money, which he sent back to Rome to gain favor with the people.

Caesar's daughter died in 54 B.C., and in 49 B.C. Pompey, jealous of Caesar's growing power and favor with the people, threw his weight to the Senate, which was also wary of Caesar's ambitions.

Caesar considered himself a defender of the people, but critics said that he gained the people's support with bribes and handouts. His enemies said he deprived the Romans of their liberty.

Caesar refused the Senate's order to give up his command and return to Rome as a private citizen. Instead, he marched his army on Rome, took control, and chased Pompey all the way to Egypt. There, Pompey was murdered before Caesar could capture him. Caesar lingered in Egypt for nine months, bewitched by the twenty-two-year-old Cleopatra. Establishing her on the throne of Egypt under his protection, Caesar went to Spain, where he defeated an army led by Pompey's sons.

## The Unconquerable God

When he returned to Rome, Caesar was invincible. He was declared dictator for ten years and saw to it that his supporters, including Brutus, became senators. As his desire for power grew obsessive, he had a statue of himself, bearing the inscription "To the Unconquerable God," erected in the Temple of Quirinus. The common people loved him; later, Caesar was declared dictator for life.

But to a number of Romans, Caesar's ambition was deplorable. The last Roman king had been overthrown 450 years before, when the Romans set up a republican government. The idea of another king ruling the "free Romans" was unthinkable. As Caesar's arrogance and power became unbearable to certain senators, they made plans to assassinate him on March 15, 44 B.C. Shakespeare's play opens a month before the murder.

Bust of Julius Caesar (date unknown). National Museum, Naples.

The Bettmann Archive.

