

# Meet William Shakespeare



*He was not of an age, but for all time.*

—Ben Jonson, poet and contemporary  
of Shakespeare

Little is known about William Shakespeare, generally acknowledged as the greatest playwright of all time. In some ways, the lack of information is ironically fitting. Whereas we can draw on personal history to understand and explain the work of most writers, in the case of Shakespeare, we must rely primarily on his work. His command of comedy and tragedy, his ability to depict the range of human character, and his profound insights into human nature add clues to the few facts that are known about his life.

William Shakespeare was born in April 1564 in the English town of Stratford-upon-Avon. The son of John Shakespeare, a successful glovemaking and public official, and Mary Arden, the daughter of a gentleman, William was the oldest surviving sibling of eight children.

Shakespeare probably attended the local grammar school and studied Latin. His writings indicate that he was familiar with classical

writers such as Ovid (the source for the story of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, the play-within-a-play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). Throughout Shakespeare's childhood, companies of touring actors visited Stratford. Although there is no evidence to prove that Shakespeare ever saw these actors perform, most scholars agree that he probably did.

In 1582, at the age of 18, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, the daughter of a farmer. The couple had become parents of two daughters and a son by 1585. Sometime in the next eight years, Shakespeare left his family in Stratford and moved to London to pursue a career in the theater. Records show that by 1592, he had become a successful actor and playwright in that city.

Although an outbreak of plague forced the London theaters to close in 1592, Shakespeare continued to write, producing the long narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* and a number of comedies. By 1594 the plague was less of a threat, and theaters reopened. Shakespeare had joined a famous acting group called the Lord Chamberlain's Men, so named for their patron, or supporter, a high official in the court of Queen Elizabeth I. One of the first plays Shakespeare wrote for this company was *Romeo and Juliet*. In 1598 Shakespeare became part owner of a major new theater, the Globe.

For more than a decade, Shakespeare produced a steady stream of works, both tragedies and comedies, which were performed at the Globe, the royal court, and other London theaters. However, shortly after the Globe was destroyed by fire in 1613, he retired and returned to Stratford.

Fairly wealthy from the sales of his plays and from his shares in both the acting company and the Globe, Shakespeare was able to buy a large house and an impressive amount of property. He died in Stratford in 1616. Seven years later the first collection of his plays was published.

# Introducing the Play

*The opening scene of A Midsummer Night's Dream leads the audience to expect an ordinary comedy plot.*

—René Girard, "Myth and Ritual in Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night's Dream"

*But A Midsummer Night's Dream does not always do exactly what we might expect, and in this way it keeps its audience guessing . . .*

—Catherine Belsey, "A Midsummer Night's Dream: A Modern Perspective"

Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream* toward the beginning of his career. The play describes the comic misadventures of two pairs of lovers who become lost in a dark wood and fall under the power of sprites.

To Shakespeare's audiences, the play's title was a clue that the play might be about romance, magic, and madness. Midsummer Night was thought to be one of the nights of the year when sprites were especially powerful. People also believed that flowers gathered on Midsummer Night could work magic and that Midsummer Night was a time when people dreamed of their true loves and sometimes went insane.

Shakespeare and other Elizabethan dramatists based their comedy plots on Classical (ancient Greek and Roman) models. Often a grumpy old father blocks the love affair between a young man and a young woman. Complications and confusions follow, until finally, after some dramatic reversal, the lovers are united. Setting his first act in Athens, the birthplace of Western classical literature, Shakespeare follows just such a plot. It is not long, however, before the play moves to the woods outside Athens, and into the English concept of Midsummer Night.

This tale of frustrated love and mistaken identity makes audiences laugh at the ridiculous ease with which lovers change the object of their affection, while still believing that their feelings are completely sincere. However, although it is a comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* also poses some profound and difficult questions: What is

love? How and why do people fall in and out of love? How is love related to questions of identity—both of the lover and the beloved? Are lovers in control of themselves and their destinies? Which is more real, the "daylight" world of reason and law or the "nighttime" world of passion and chaos? Shakespeare leaves these questions for the audience to answer.

## THE TIME AND PLACE

Drama was tremendously popular during Shakespeare's lifetime. The queen herself, Elizabeth I, loved to watch plays—including many by Shakespeare—in her court. Companies of actors traveled throughout England, performing for eager audiences. Over a short period of time, dramatic literature developed rapidly, from the slapstick plays popular during Shakespeare's youth to the complex dramas written by Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

Yet not everyone in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England loved plays and acting. Theater owners tried to avoid city authorities, many of whom disapproved of the theater because it drew large crowds, creating the potential for crime, the possible spread of disease, and the introduction of controversial ideas. Many local authorities mistrusted and persecuted visiting actors, which forced the actors to seek the protection of powerful nobles. Religious factions such as the Puritans decried acting as wicked and tried to outlaw it. In fact, the Puritans succeeded in closing down the theaters in 1642.

Many of Shakespeare's plays seem to address the issue of whether drama is mere entertainment or a vehicle for showing the truth of human experience. In the eyes of contemporary critic Alvin B. Kernan:

*Shakespeare seems to have constructed in Dream the "worst case" for theater, voicing all the attacks on drama being made in his time and deliberately showing plays, actors, and audiences at their worst.*

A *Midsummer Night's Dream* contains a play-within-a-play, which features comically clumsy writing, poor staging, cheap costumes, and awful acting. Furthermore, Oberon, the fairy king, can be seen as a kind of mad director, stage managing the passions of others for his own amusement or pleasure.

Yet *A Midsummer Night's Dream* allows us to laugh at human nature and observe the interaction

between actors and audience. *Pyramus and Thisbe*—the play-within-a-play—may be silly, but it is funny. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can also be seen as a tribute to the magic of illusion. After waking from their dream parts in Oberon's "play," Bottom, Lysander, Demetrius, Helena, and Hermia all express a sense of wonder and bewilderment at their recent experience.

### Did You Know?

Shakespeare wrote much of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and most of his plays, in a style called blank verse. This style was fairly new in the 1500s. Blank verse was first used in English drama in a play four years before Shakespeare was born. It follows a flexible rhythmic pattern consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable.

Look, for example, at the lines that Hippolyta speaks to Theseus in act 1, scene 1:

*Four days will quickly steep  
themselves in night;  
Four nights will quickly dream  
away the time;*

Most English verse, or poetry, falls naturally into this pattern. Prose, or ordinary, everyday language, was also becoming a popular dramatic writing style, frequently mixed with blank verse.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare uses different writing styles to suit different characters. For example, Bottom and his friends generally speak in prose, which gives them a simple, rustic quality. For the speeches of Oberon and Titania, Shakespeare uses a much more complex form of poetry, implying the exquisite beauty and magic of the fairy kingdom.