William Shakespeare

Shakespeare, William (1564-1616), English poet and playwright, recognized in much of the world as the greatest of all dramatists.

Life

A complete, authoritative account of Shakespeare's life is lacking; much supposition surrounds relatively few facts. His day of birth is traditionally held to be April 23; it is known he was baptized on April 26, 1564, in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire. The third of eight children, he was the eldest son of John Shakespeare, a locally prominent merchant, and Mary Arden, daughter of a Roman Catholic member of the landed gentry. He was probably educated at the local grammar school. As the eldest son, Shakespeare ordinarily would have been apprenticed to his father's shop so that he could learn and eventually take over the business, but according to one apocryphal account he was apprenticed to a butcher because of reverses in his father's financial situation. In recent years, it has more convincingly been argued that he was caught up in the secretive network of Catholic believers and priests who strove to cultivate their faith in the inhospitable conditions of Elizabethan England. At the turn of the 1580s, it is claimed, he served as tutor in the household of Alexander Houghton, a prominent Lancashire Catholic and friend of the Stratford schoolmaster John Cottom. While others in this network went on to suffer and die for their beliefs, Shakespeare must somehow have extricated himself, for there is little evidence to suggest any subsequent involvement in their circles. In 1582 he married Anne Hathaway, the daughter of a farmer. He is supposed to have left Stratford after he was caught poaching in the deer park of Sir Thomas Lucy, a local justice of the peace. Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway produced a daughter, Susanna, in 1583 and twins-a boy and a girl-in 1585. The boy died 11 years later.

Shakespeare apparently arrived in London in about 1588, and by 1592 had attained success as an actor and a playwright. Shortly thereafter, he secured the patronage of Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton. The publication of Shakespeare's two fashionably erotic narrative poems *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594) and of his *Sonnets* (published 1609, but circulated previously in manuscript) established his reputation as a gifted and popular Renaissance poet. The *Sonnets* describe the devotion of a character, often identified as the poet himself, to a young man whose beauty and virtue he praises and to a mysterious and faithless dark lady with whom the poet is infatuated. The ensuing triangular situation, resulting from the attraction of the poet's friend to the dark lady, is treated with passionate intensity and psychological insight. They are prized for their exploration of love in all its aspects, and a poem such as "Sonnet 18" is one of the most famous love poems of all time:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate.
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date.
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
And every fair from fair sometimes declines,
By chance, or nature's changing course untrimmed.
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st
Nor shall Death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

While the poem may be familiar, it is less well known that this is an exquisite celebration of a young man's beauty. The fact that 126 of the 154 sonnets are apparently addressed by a male poet to another man has caused some critical discomfort over the years. However, Shakespeare's modern reputation is based mainly on the 38 plays that he apparently wrote, modified, or collaborated on. Although generally popular in his day, these plays were frequently little esteemed by his educated contemporaries, who considered English plays of their own day to be only vulgar entertainment.

Shakespeare's professional life in London was marked by a number of financially advantageous arrangements that permitted him to share in the profits of his acting company, the Lord Chamberlain's Company, later called the King's Men, and its two theatres, the Globe Theatre and the Blackfriars. His plays were given special presentation at the courts of Elizabeth I and James I more frequently than those of any other contemporary dramatists. It is known that he risked losing royal favour only once, in 1599, when his company performed "the play of the deposing and killing of King Richard II" at the request of a group of conspirators against Elizabeth. They were led by Elizabeth's unsuccessful court favourite, Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, and by the Earl of Southampton. In the subsequent inquiry, Shakespeare's company was absolved of complicity in the conspiracy.

After about 1608, Shakespeare's dramatic production lessened and it seems that he spent more time in Stratford. There he had established his family in an imposing house called New Place, and had become a leading local citizen. He died on April 23, 1616, and was buried in the Stratford church.

Works

Although the precise date of many of Shakespeare's plays is in doubt, his dramatic career is generally divided into four periods: the first period, involving experimentation, although still clearly influenced by or imitating Classical models; the second period, in which Shakespeare appears to achieve a truly individual style and approach; a third, darker period, in which he wrote not only his major tragedies but also the more difficult comedies, known as the "problem plays" because their resolutions

leave troubling and unanswered questions; and his final period, when his style blossomed in the romantic tragicomedies-exotic, symbolic pieces which while happily resolved involve a greater complexity of vision.

These divisions are necessarily arbitrary ways of viewing Shakespeare's creative development, since his plays are notoriously hard to date accurately, either in terms of when they were written or when they were first performed. Commentators differ and the dates in this article should be seen as plausible approximations. In all periods, the plots of his plays were frequently drawn from chronicles, histories, or earlier fiction, as were the plays of other contemporary dramatists.

First Period

Shakespeare's first period was one of experimentation. His early plays, unlike his more mature work, are characterized to a degree by formal and rather obvious construction and often stylized verse.

Four plays dramatizing the English civil strife of the 15th century are possibly Shakespeare's earliest dramatic works. Chronicle history plays were a popular genre of the time. These plays, *Henry VI,* Parts I, II, and III (c. 1590-1592) and *Richard III* (c. 1593), deal with the evil results of weak leadership and of national disunity fostered for selfish ends. The cycle closes with the death of Richard III and the ascent to the throne of Henry VII, the founder of the Tudor dynasty, to which Elizabeth belonged. In style and structure, these plays are related partly to medieval drama and partly to the works of earlier Elizabethan dramatists, especially Christopher Marlowe. Either indirectly through such dramatists or directly, the influence of the Classical Roman dramatist Seneca is also reflected in the organization of these four plays, in the bloodiness of many of their scenes, and in their highly coloured, bombastic language. Senecan influence, exerted by way of the earlier English dramatist Thomas Kyd, is particularly obvious in *Titus Andronicus* (c. 1590), a tragedy of righteous revenge for heinous and bloody acts, which are staged in sensational detail. While previous generations have found its violent excesses absurd or disgusting, some directors and critics since the 1960s have recognized in its horror the articulation of more contemporary preoccupations with the meanings of violence.

Shakespeare's comedies of the first period represent a wide range. *The Comedy of Errors* (c. 1592), an uproarious farce in imitation of Classical Roman comedy, depends for its appeal on the mistakes in identity of two sets of twins involved in romance and war. Farce is not so strongly emphasized in *The Taming of the Shrew* (c. 1592), a comedy of character. *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (c. 1592-1593) depends on the appeal of romantic love. In contrast, *Love's Labour's Lost* (c. 1595) satirizes the loves of its main male characters as well as the fashionable devotion to studious pursuits by which these noblemen had first sought to avoid romantic and worldly ensnarement. The dialogue in which many of the characters voice their pretensions ridicules the artificially ornate, courtly style typified by the works of the English novelist and dramatist John Lyly, the court conventions of the time, and perhaps the scientific discussions of Sir Walter Raleigh and his cohorts.

Second Period

Shakespeare's second period includes his most important plays concerned with English history, his so-called joyous comedies, and two major tragedies. In this period,

his style and approach became highly individualized. The second-period historical plays include *Richard II* (c. 1595), *Henry IV*, Parts I and II (c. 1597), and *Henry V* (c. 1599). They cover the span immediately before that of the *Henry VI* plays. *Richard II* is a study of a weak, sensitive, self-dramatizing, but sympathetic monarch who loses his kingdom to his forceful successor, Henry IV. In the two parts of *Henry IV*, Henry recognizes his own guilt. His fears for his own son, later Henry V, prove unfounded, as the young prince displays an essentially responsible attitude towards the duties of kingship. In an alternation of masterful comic and serious scenes, the fat knight Falstaff and the rebel Hotspur reveal contrasting excesses between which the prince finds his proper position. The mingling of the tragic and the comic to suggest a broad range of humanity became one of Shakespeare's favourite devices.

Outstanding among the comedies of the second period is *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c. 1595-1596). Its fantasy-filled insouciance is achieved by the interweaving of several plots involving two pairs of noble lovers, a group of bumbling and unconsciously comic townspeople, and members of the fairy realm, notably Puck, King Oberon, and Queen Titania. These three worlds are brought together in a series of encounters that veer from the magical to the absurd and back again in the space of only a few lines. In Act III, for example, Oberon plays a trick on Titania while she sleeps, employing Puck to anoint her with a potion that will cause her to fall in love with the first creature she sees on waking. As luck would have it, she opens her eyes to the sight of Bottom the weaver, himself adorned by Puck with an ass's head. Yet the comic episode of the Queen of the Fairies "enamoured of an ass" (4.i.76) echoes the play's more profound concerns with the nature of the real.

Subtle evocation of atmosphere, of the sort that characterizes this play, is found also in the tragicomedy *The Merchant of Venice* (c. 1594-1598). The Renaissance motifs of masculine friendship and romantic love in this play are portrayed in opposition to the bitter inhumanity of a Jewish usurer named Shylock, whose own misfortunes are presented so as to arouse understanding and sympathy. While this play undoubtedly deals in the currency of European anti-Semitism, its exploration of power and prejudice also enables a humanist critique of such bigotry. As Shylock himself says, confronted by the double standards of his Venetian opponents:

> He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million; laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies, and what's his reason?-I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that.
> (3.i.50-63)

The type of quick-witted, warm, and responsive young woman exemplified in this play by Portia reappears in the joyous comedies of the second period.

The witty comedy *Much Ado About Nothing* (c. 1598-1599) is marred, in the opinion of some critics, by an insensitive treatment of its female characters. However, Shakespeare's most mature comedies, *As You Like It* (c. 1599) and *Twelfth Night* (c. 1601), are characterized by lyricism, ambiguity, and the attraction of beautiful, charming, and strong-minded heroines such as Rosalind. In *As You Like It*, the contrast between the manners of the Elizabethan court and those current in the English countryside is drawn in a rich, sweet, and varied vein. Shakespeare constructed a complex pattern between different characters and between appearance and reality. He used this pattern to comment on a variety of human foibles. In that respect, *As You Like It* is similar to *Twelfth Night*, in which the comical side of love is illustrated by the misadventures of two pairs of romantic lovers and of a number of realistically conceived and clowning characters in the sub-plot. Yet there is a darker side even to these plays. In *Twelfth Night*, the conventional resolution is disrupted by the exclusion of Malvolio, a figure who has served as the butt of the comic sub-plot. Rather than participate in the concluding scene of forgiveness and reconciliation, he storms off stage with the words "I'll be reveng'd on the whole pack of you!" (5.i.377). Another comedy of the second period is *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (c. 1597); this play is a farce about middle-class life in which Falstaff reappears as the comic victim.

Two major tragedies, differing considerably in nature, mark the beginning and the end of the second period. *Romeo and Juliet* (c. 1595), famous for its poetic treatment of the ecstasy of youthful love, dramatizes the fate of two lovers victimized by the feuds and misunderstandings of their elders and by their own hasty temperaments. On the other hand, *Julius Caesar* (c. 1599) is a serious tragedy of political rivalries, less intense in style than the tragic dramas that followed.

Third Period

Shakespeare's third period includes his greatest tragedies and his so-called dark or bitter comedies. The tragedies of this period are the most profound of his works and those in which his poetic idiom became an extremely supple dramatic instrument capable of recording the passage of human thought and the many dimensions of given dramatic situations. *Hamlet* (c. 1601), his most famous play, goes far beyond other tragedies of revenge in picturing the mingled sordidness and glory of the human condition. Hamlet feels that he is living in a world of deceit and corruption. It is the precipitous marriage of his mother to Claudius, his uncle, that is the source of his unease: the wedding has taken place barely two months after the sudden death of Hamlet's father, the king. His suspicions are spectacularly confirmed by the appearance of the dead king's ghost. Confirming that he was murdered by Claudius, the ghost urges Hamlet to revenge. Yet this injunction is the trigger for a dramatic exploration of Hamlet's self-doubt, an introspective torment that leads him to the brink of suicide in perhaps the most famous Shakespearean line of all, "To be, or not to be, that is the question" (3.i.58). As Hamlet recognizes, his hesitancy is akin to the sleep of oblivion:

> And thus the native hue of resolution
> Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,

And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action.
(3.i.86-90)

Yet in regaining "the name of action", Hamlet brings about the self-destruction that his indecision had only mimicked. Through such density of character and language the play commands the affection and attention that is still accorded it today.

Othello (c. 1602-1604) portrays the growth of unjustified jealousy in the protagonist, Othello, a Moor serving as a general in the Venetian army. The innocent object of his jealousy is his wife, Desdemona. In this tragedy, Othello's evil lieutenant, Iago, draws him into mistaken jealousy in order to ruin him. *King Lear* (c. 1604-1606), conceived on a more epic scale, deals with the consequences of the irresponsibility and misjudgement of Lear, a ruler of early Britain, and of his councillor, the Duke of Gloucester. The tragic outcome is a result of giving power to his evil offspring, rather than to his good offspring. Lear's daughter Cordelia displays a redeeming love that makes the tragic conclusion a vindication of goodness, though a bleak resolution because Cordelia dies. This conclusion is reinforced by the portrayal of evil as self-defeating, exemplified by the fates of Cordelia's sisters and of Gloucester's opportunistic son. *Antony and Cleopatra* (c. 1606-1607) is concerned with a different type of love, namely the middle-aged passion of the Roman general Mark Antony for the Egyptian queen Cleopatra. Their love is glorified by some of the most sensuous poetry written by Shakespeare, as in this description of the Egyptian queen by Antony's friend, Enobarbus:

The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne
Burned on the water. The poop was beaten gold;
Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
The winds were love-sick with them. The oars were silver,
Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made
The water which they beat to follow faster,
As amorous of their strokes. For her own person,
It beggared all description. She did lie
In her pavilion-cloth of gold, of tissue-
O'er picturing that Venus where we see
The fancy outwork nature.
(2.ii.198-208)

In *Macbeth* (c. 1606), Shakespeare depicts the tragedy of a great and basically good man who, led on by others and because of a defect in his own nature, succumbs to murderous ambition. In getting and retaining the Scottish throne, Macbeth dulls his humanity to the point where he becomes capable of any amoral act. As with Hamlet, this retreat from a full humanity is paradoxically accompanied by a heightened self-

awareness; yet for Macbeth there is no redemption, only a descent into a bleak nihilism. Human existence, as he sees it, amounts to nothing:

> Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
> To the last syllable of recorded time,
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle.
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.
> (5.iv.18-27)

Three other plays of this period suggest a bitterness that these tragedies more successfully contain, because the protagonists do not seem to possess greatness or tragic stature. In *Troilus and Cressida* (c. 1602), the most intellectually contrived of Shakespeare's plays, the gulf between the ideal and the real, both individually and politically, is skilfully evoked. In *Coriolanus* (c. 1608), another tragedy taking place in antiquity, the legendary Roman hero Caius Marcius Coriolanus is portrayed as unable to bring himself either to woo the Roman masses or to crush them by force. *Timon of Athens* (c. 1607) is a similarly bitter play about a character reduced to misanthropy by the ingratitude of his sycophants. Because of the uneven quality of the writing, this tragedy is considered to be a collaboration, quite possibly with Thomas Middleton.

The two comedies of this period also are dark in mood. In the 20th century these plays gained the name of "problem plays" because they do not fit into clear categories or present easy resolution. *All's Well That Ends Well* (c. 1598-1604) and *Measure for Measure* (c. 1604) are both plays that question accepted patterns of morality without offering the comfort of solutions.

Fourth Period

The fourth period of Shakespeare's work comprises his principal romantic tragicomedies. Towards the end of his career, Shakespeare created several plays that, through the intervention of magic, art, compassion, or grace, often suggest redemptive hope for the human condition. These plays are written with a grave quality differing considerably from his earlier comedies, but they end happily with a reunion or final reconciliation. The tragicomedies depend for part of their appeal upon the lure of a distant time or place, and all seem more obviously symbolic than most of his earlier works. To many critics, the tragicomedies signify a final ripeness in Shakespeare's own outlook, but other authorities believe that the change reflects only a change in fashion in the drama.

The romantic tragicomedy *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* (c. 1606-1608) concerns the title character's painful loss of his wife and the persecution of his daughter. After many exotic adventures, Pericles is reunited with his loved ones. In *Cymbeline* (c. 1609-1610)

and *The Winter's Tale* (c. 1610-1611), characters suffer great loss and pain, but are reunited. Perhaps the most successful product of this particular vein of creativity, however, is what may be Shakespeare's last complete play, *The Tempest* (c. 1611), in which the resolution suggests the beneficial effects of the union of wisdom and power. In this play Prospero, deprived of his dukedom and banished to an island, confounds his usurping brother by employing magical powers and furthering a love match between his own daughter and the son of one of his enemies. Shakespeare's poetic power reached great heights in this beautiful, lyrical play, and in Prospero's surrender of his magical powers at its conclusion, some critics-perhaps fancifully-have seen Shakespeare's own relinquishment of the theatre's "rough magic".

Two final plays, sometimes ascribed to Shakespeare, presumably are the products of collaboration. A historical drama, *Henry VIII* (c. 1613) was probably written with the English dramatist John Fletcher, as was *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (c. 1613; published posthumously, 1634), a story of the love of two noble friends for one woman.

Literary Reputation

Shakespeare's reputation as perhaps the greatest of all dramatists was not achieved during his lifetime. Though his contemporary Ben Jonson declared him "not of an age, but for all time", early 17th-century taste found the plays of Jonson himself, or Thomas Middleton, or Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, equally worthy of praise. Only in the Restoration period-some 50 or more years after Shakespeare's death-did his reputation begin to eclipse that of his contemporaries. This is not to say that the late 17th- and early 18th-century theatre treated his plays with anything like reverence. When they were performed, it was most often in versions rewritten for the fashions of the age, purged-as their adaptors maintained-of their coarseness and absurdities. These alterations could be very significant: in one version of *King Lear* popular throughout the 18th century Lear and Cordelia are reprieved at the play's conclusion, transforming a tragedy into a tragicomedy! Perhaps paradoxically, it was exactly this fondness for adapting Shakespeare that kept his plays in the repertoire while those of Jonson, Middleton, and others went down to obscurity. Also, during the first half of the 18th century Shakespeare began to be afforded the role of English national poet, a process that reached its culmination in the installation of a memorial statue in Westminster Abbey in 1741 and a huge Jubilee festival, staged in 1764 to celebrate the bicentenary of his birth.

The Romantic movement, particularly the writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Johann Wolfgang Goethe, did much to shape both Shakespeare's international reputation and the account of his achievement that has persisted ever since. Romantic authors claimed Shakespeare as a great precursor of their own literary values: his work was celebrated as an embodiment of universal human truths, an unequalled articulation of the human condition in all its nobility and variety. In later Victorian Britain this view was married to the moralistic "civilizing" mission of educationalists and empire builders, while American writers looked to Shakespeare as a foundation stone of their own distinct cultural identity. The years since World War I have if anything cemented these positions: the establishment of institutions such as the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Britain, and the Folger Shakespeare Library in the United States, has ensured that his

work has remained a central icon of Western culture. The claim that his plays have the power to transcend their historical moment and speak to all humanity now underlies an insistence on Shakespeare's continuing relevance to our own situation: as the title of a seminal book by Jan Kott put it, Shakespeare is "our contemporary".

Nevertheless, there have always been dissenters. Writers of the stature of Leo Tolstoy and George Bernard Shaw were prepared to offer devastatingly negative judgements on the plays and their author, while others have advanced eccentric theories designed to prove that such great plays could not have been written by someone of Shakespeare's obscure origins and limited education. In their own way, recent Shakespearean scholars have also contributed to a demythologizing of the bard that some think threatens the security of his reputation. Yet even as the focus of such activities Shakespeare remains central to the work of literary critics, to theatre throughout the world, to Western accounts of national and cultural identity, and to the British tourist industry. These are not positions he will be allowed to surrender easily.