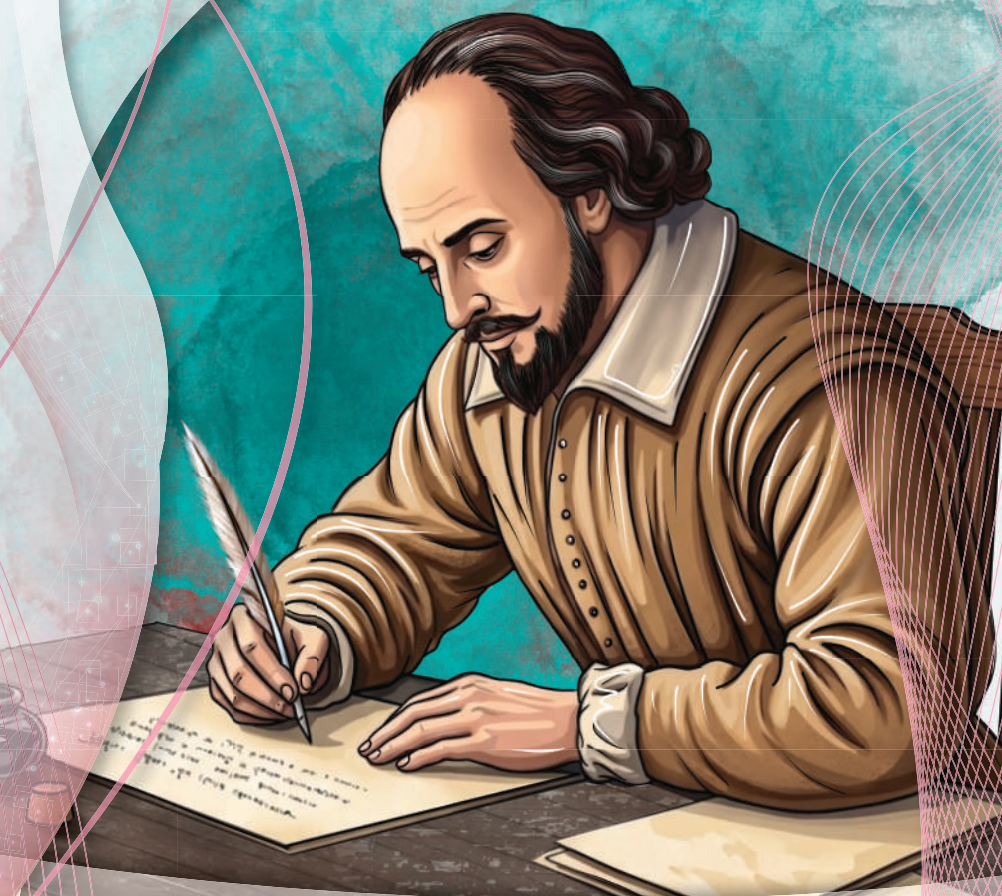




Core Knowledge® VOICES IN HISTORY™



William Shakespeare

All the World on Stage

by Beau Lee Gambold

illustrated by Ivan Pešić

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William Shakespeare

All the World on Stage

by

Beau Lee Gambold

illustrated by *Ivan Pešić*

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Prologue

Brave New World

Sixty-six million years ago, an asteroid the size of a small mountain struck Earth. Tidal waves and earthquakes rippled out from the impact, forests burned, and the planet would never be the same: Clouds of dust and sulfur blocked out the sun for years, and more than 75 percent of the species alive at the time—including almost all dinosaurs—became extinct. But then a new era of life began.

While the impact left a 110-mile-wide (180 km) crater that we call Chicxulub, the asteroid itself was completely destroyed. But modern scientists have been able to piece together the asteroid's size, its speed, when and where it hit, and many other facts by studying the incredible effect it had on our planet.

A little less than sixty-six million years later—just over 450 years ago—a boy was born in a town we call Stratford-upon-Avon. The two events might not at first seem similar. But between 1589 and 1613, this person wrote nearly forty plays, 154 sonnets, and two

asteroid: a space rock that orbits the sun, like a planet but much smaller—sometimes as small as a pebble

sonnets: poems with fourteen lines that use any of a variety of traditional rhyme schemes; in English, usually have ten syllables per line and a rhyming couplet, or two lines that rhyme, at the end

long poems. His body of work includes some of the most famous and beautiful passages in English as well as the first known use of more than 1,700 English words. It influenced countless writers who came after, and the plays are still performed all over the world, translated into hundreds of languages. Today, there are theaters, societies, festivals, clubs, classes, and many, many books, articles, movies, and more, all centered on the work of this one person. People have spoken his words in palaces, prisons, and parks and on untold numbers of stages. One can only guess at how many times the question has been asked: “To be or not to be?”

And yet, a lot like the Chicxulub asteroid, this man left almost no pieces of himself. There are no letters, diaries, memoirs, interviews, or even little notes he scribbled in the margins of books. We have no confirmed sample of his handwriting other than his signature, and experts still argue over whether a painting of his actual likeness exists. Though he was famous while he was alive, it was not then common to write biographies of writers, and no one recorded what he was like. A few scholars even suggest that the person who produced all this beautiful writing was not who we think he was.

memoirs: books written by people about their own lives and experiences
scholars: people who do advanced study on a specific subject

Like geologists looking for telling elements in buried rocks, scholars today comb for clues about this man in land deeds, church records, and bills of payment from the age in which he lived. They search for hints in his plays that might shed light on his life. Just as we cannot know everything about the asteroid that transformed Earth sixty-six million years ago, it is impossible to know now what this person was really like; any biography of his life must rely on speculation, as well as a touch of imagination. Was he calm and kind, his smile a little knowing? Or would he have been distracted, always dreaming up the next new line, that perfect rhyming couplet to end the scene?

What we know for sure is that the world, after William Shakespeare, was never quite the same.

geologists: scientists who study Earth and its history by looking at what the planet is made of, from the tiniest pieces of sand and stone to large mountains and canyons

elements: basic building blocks of matter that are made up of only one type of atom and are listed in the periodic table

rhyming couplet: a pair of lines of poetry that rhyme; common in Elizabethan plays, especially at the end of a scene; example from *Hamlet*: "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King."

Elizabethan England

Queen Elizabeth I was the queen of England from 1558 until 1603. Her reign is considered a golden age—a period in which arts, education, and fashion flourished. But it was also a time of inequality. A small percentage of people owned almost all of the land, passing down wealth and titles within aristocratic families. There were wars against Spain and Ireland, and religious conflict led to several assassination plots. Secret messages were passed, jousts were held, knights were knighted, and theaters were crowded with commoners and nobles alike.



aristocratic: noble in rank, like a knight or a duke

1

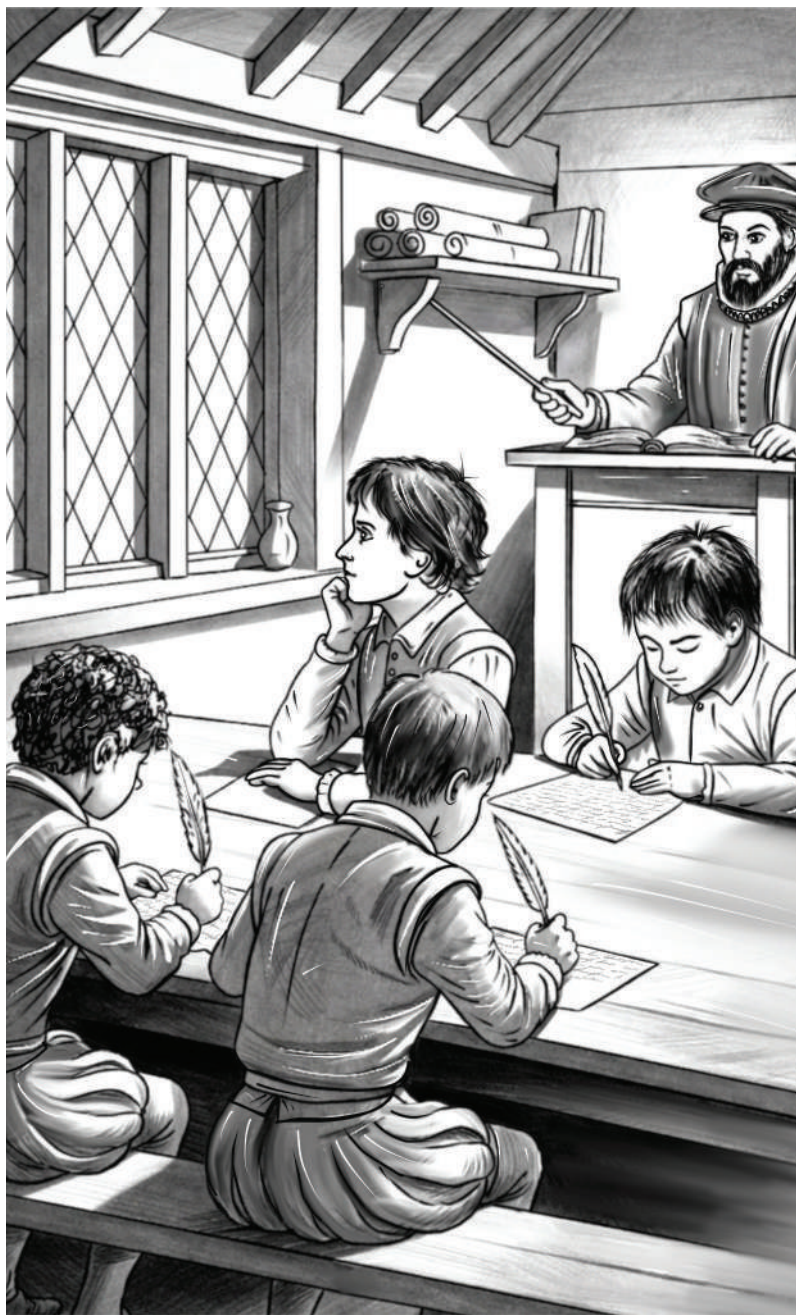
A Boy in Stratford

A young boy looked out the window at the gray morning and sighed. Stratford-upon-Avon was a dreary place to grow up.

The boy was a student at the King's New School, the free grammar school in town. It was a good opportunity, but challenging. School in those days started very early. In the summer, students learned from six in the morning until six at night. In the cold, dark winter, their school days started an hour later. But all year round, the students attended class six days a week. Their only day off was Sunday, when they were required to attend church. There was no summer break.

The King's New School was housed in a single large room above the town's guildhall. More than forty boys between the ages of seven and fifteen spent their days on rows of hard benches, learning together from the same schoolmaster. Students were taught some arithmetic and also had religious lessons, but most of what they learned was Latin.

grammar school: in Elizabethan England, a school that taught Latin grammar, religion, and arithmetic; often funded by a guild (a group of local merchants or craftspeople) and typically attended by boys of lower social standing until age fourteen or fifteen, as the children of nobles were taught by private tutors



Latin was a sign of class, status, power, and influence in Elizabethan England. It was spoken by the queen and her court, and it was the language of instruction at universities—the only way to get a higher education was to speak Latin. Anyone hoping to rise above the station of their birth would want to know the language. And so the boys read and memorized Latin passages, translated between Latin and English, and studied Latin synonyms. One common schoolbook taught 150 different ways of saying “Thank you for your letter” in Latin. Students were even expected to use Latin when they spoke to one another.

Lessons were long and often dull, and absolute obedience was expected. Whipping was a common punishment, at school and at home. Physical punishment was considered an educational tool and a necessary part of teaching and learning Latin; not so long before the Elizabethan era—and possibly even during it—students studying Latin at Cambridge University were expected to whip a boy as part of their final exams.

William Shakespeare attended the King’s New School. He would have climbed the outdoor staircase to the second floor of the guildhall in the dark, damp, and cold winter mornings, bleary-eyed, bracing himself

Cambridge University: along with Oxford, one of the two oldest and most respected universities in England

for a school day that no doubt began with the lighting of a candle, followed by hours of poring over Latin conjugations. In spring, he perhaps glanced out past his classmates at the first warm day, blooming beyond the window with birds and flowers and freedom, while he was stuck indoors. Even if he did well in class, he might have grown bored waiting for others to catch up. If he got in trouble, there was always a whip waiting to cut through the air just behind him.

Or perhaps young Will enjoyed school. Most scholars assume that he was a quite intelligent boy. Maybe he found Latin amusing; he might have enjoyed the challenge of playing with words, with this whole language that most people didn't use in everyday conversation. Lessons might have felt like a game, and maybe getting to learn and constantly toy with a spare language helped prepare him for his future as one of the greatest writers in any tongue.

Will might have particularly liked to take part in the plays at school. The plays were in Latin, of course. But the King's New School might have been Will's first experience imagining, then acting out, the lives of other people. Perhaps he realized immediately that he had a special talent for it.

conjugations: different forms of verbs that indicate who is carrying out an action and when

Getting to Know

The King's New School was an important opportunity for children in Stratford, but it was not open to everyone. Girls were not allowed to attend, and children of poor, lower-class families were expected to work instead of attend school. Also, even though instruction was free, students needed their own candles, quills, and paper, which were expensive for families with little means.

Children of gentry, nobles, and other wealthy families, on the other hand, often had private tutors. Tutors made it possible for girls to have an education if their parents allowed, and some girls learned to speak multiple languages, sing, dance, and play an instrument, just like Queen Elizabeth. But it was therefore the sons of tradespeople—merchants and others hoping to raise their social status—who made up most of the students at the King's New School.

We know that William Shakespeare was baptized on April 26, 1564. Since most babies were baptized within three days of birth, April 23rd is generally celebrated as Will's birthday. He was the third of eight children, but his two older sisters had died in infancy, making him the oldest.

The boy who would become the Bard of Avon was born in a plague year. A sixth of the two thousand people living in Stratford in 1564 had died by the time Will saw his first Christmas. Of the babies born in town that year, fewer than half lived to celebrate a birthday. If a rat had

bard: a poet or writer of ballads; thought to have first been used as a nickname for Shakespeare ("the Bard") by the actor David Garrick in the mid-1700s

nested in the thatch above baby Will that first summer, we may never have heard the names Macbeth or Hamlet. But Will survived.

Plague Years

Known as “the pestilence” at the time, the plague was a disease spread by fleas that lived on rats. It spread quickly, was often fatal, and was the cause of many pandemics throughout history, including several times during Shakespeare’s life.

Will’s parents were John and Mary Shakespeare. John was a glover—he made gloves and sold them from his shop in the family home on Henley Street, which still stands today. John was also an enterprising man. He tanned the animal hides that he used to make leather for his gloves. He bought land that he leased out to others to farm. And he held a series of public offices: Just after Will was born, John was appointed alderman, a position similar to city councilor. In 1568, John Shakespeare became the high bailiff of Stratford, which was like being mayor.

Will’s mother was born Mary Arden. Her maiden name was important because she was distantly related to a very wealthy man named Edward Arden. She could also trace her name and lineage all the way back to the Domesday Book.

pestilence: a contagious disease that spreads quickly and is often deadly

enterprising: creative and hardworking

lineage: line of descent; ancestry

The Domesday Book

The Domesday Book was a census of the population and wealth of much of England and parts of Wales, recorded in 1086. It was taken by supporters of William the Conqueror, who invaded England and became its king in 1066.

By the end of the twelfth century, this census had come to be called the Domesday—or Doomsday—Book because it was thought to be as thorough as the book that Christians believed God would read on the day of judgment, which would contain every deed in every person's life. The book was important to Elizabethans because it could demonstrate how long a family had owned a piece of land. If your name was listed in the Domesday Book, it could help your claim to a title and a position in the nobility.

Around 1575, John Shakespeare applied to the College of Arms for a coat of arms. If granted, a coat of arms would bring honor to him and his children, giving them the status of gentry even though John had been born a yeoman. With his civic career and his wife's lineage, there was a good chance that the honor would be granted. Young Will and his siblings would have more respect and ease than their father had known in his youth.

But something happened. John's fortunes took a turn for the worse, and his application to the College of Arms was never granted.

census: an organized count of population and property

College of Arms: an institution within the British royal household that assigns and keeps archives of family coats of arms and noble lineages; also called the Heralds' College

yeoman: a commoner who owned property; could also work in a noble household or take up clerical responsibilities

Class in Will's World

The class system in Elizabeth's England consisted of a number of ranks below the monarch. Highest were the nobles, who had titles—like duke, earl, or baron—and were highborn or appointed by the monarch. Next were gentry, who had enough wealth that they did not have to work but lacked the title or status of nobles. Nobles and gentry made up about 2 percent of the population. Then there were yeomen, who worked for a living but often lived quite comfortably, like Will's father. Last were the poor, usually laborers, whose lives depended on decisions made by the nobles and gentry who hired them.

Women had to obey men, and children were expected to obey their elders. Even the queen, if she had married, would have been expected to obey her husband. Many think this is why Elizabeth never married.

2

Lost Years

Toward the end of Will's years in grammar school, his father's charmed life began to take a turn. We do not know why. Some think that John remained a Catholic after the English Reformation and that this was the source of his bad luck. Others think that alcohol addiction caused his fall from grace (one of his earliest civic positions was "ale taster"). Another theory is that John illegally traded wool products and that this landed him in trouble with the authorities.

We know that John fell into debt. He failed to pay back a loan and, as a result, lost the land from his wife's dowry. He stopped attending alderman meetings and was eventually struck from the list of Stratford's leaders. There are many signs that John was no longer a respected figure but few clues as to why.

charmed life: one of many phrases that Shakespeare first introduced, used today to refer to someone who seems to be touched by wonderful luck; first appears in Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*

dowry: the money or goods traditionally brought by a woman to her husband as part of their marriage

The English Reformation

In 1517, a priest named Martin Luther began the Protestant Reformation in Germany. The Reformation questioned the Catholic Church's position as the only way for people to practice the Christian faith.

Soon afterward, the king of England, Henry VIII, wanted to divorce his wife, but the pope wouldn't let him. Angered, Henry announced that England was leaving the Catholic Church, effectively making the country Protestant. Henry's heir, Edward VI, continued to separate England from its Catholic past. But after Edward died in 1553, his Catholic half sister, Mary I, became queen.

Mary became known as "Bloody Mary" because she burned more than three hundred Protestants at the stake. But when Mary died, Elizabeth I became queen. Elizabeth was Protestant.

Under Elizabeth, it became increasingly illegal—and dangerous—for anyone to practice Catholicism. By the time Will was a boy, it was common for a person to lose their property or even their life if they were discovered to be Catholic. If John was Catholic, it might explain his misfortunes.

Hard times for John Shakespeare meant hard times for his family. Though many of Will's schoolmates got to attend the University of Oxford, Will didn't go to college, probably because he could not afford to.

What did teenage Will do instead? The fact is we do not know: There is a mysterious, fourteen-year period—from roughly 1578, when Will left the King's New

School, to 1592—that has become known as the Lost Years. We know three things for certain about William Shakespeare's life during this time: He married, he had a child, then he had two more children.

The person he married was Anne Hathaway, a farmer's daughter from just outside of Stratford. When they married, Will was eighteen, and Anne was twenty-six. The wedding, in November of 1582, was rushed, probably because Anne was expecting a baby. Their first daughter was born in May 1583. She was named Susanna.



Twins arrived in 1585: Judith and Hamnet. We know of the births and of Will's marriage because they are recorded in Stratford's civic records. But the next mention of Will in any historical document is in 1592. So what happened between 1585 and 1592? For that matter, what about the years between 1578 and 1582?

People have guessed, inferred, and flat-out invented stories, some as broad and adventurous as the tales Will would someday tell. Many scholars looked for clues in Will's writings. He wrote about the law; surely he had been a lawyer's clerk. But he also knew military terms; perhaps he served in the army? And how else could he have learned so much about the nautical world without taking a sea voyage, perhaps to America? But there are also plenty of references to gloves and leather—Will might have simply worked in his father's shop, helping make and sell gloves.

"A Glover's Paring Knife"

"Does he not wear a great round beard like a Glover's paring knife?" asks a character in Shakespeare's play The Merry Wives of Windsor. Such a knife was a very specific tool that leatherworkers like John Shakespeare used to strip fur from animal hides. Perhaps Will had his own experience with this object.

inferred: came to a conclusion based on clues or evidence

nautical: concerning sailors, ships, or navigation

A possible clue as to Will's whereabouts comes from 1681, when a man wrote that Will had been "a schoolmaster in the country." One theory has it that he spent the years 1580–81 in northern England, working as a tutor to the sons of wealthy Catholic gentlemen. There is even a "William Shakeshafte" mentioned in the will of one of these gentlemen at the time (spelling during the era was inconsistent, so this *might* refer to young Shakespeare). There were also distant connections between these northern households and the most respected acting company in London at the time, Lord Strange's Men. Maybe Will's early school plays now began to develop into a serious pursuit? Perhaps he made contacts that would help him find his way in faraway London.

If Will did work as a tutor in the north, it might explain why he left little trace of his time there: Many of the households that he would have taught or acted in were eventually exposed as Catholic, and the houses' leaders were executed as traitors to the throne.

A different story has it that back in Stratford, sometime after Susanna's birth, Will got into trouble with a man named Sir Lucy. In this story, Will was caught poaching deer on Sir Lucy's land. Feeling that

poaching: illegally hunting or fishing on land that is not one's own

he was treated harshly, Will wrote a song making fun of Lucy. The song became popular, and Will fled to London to escape Lucy's wrath.

But there is also the chance that Will stayed in Stratford until a troupe of traveling actors invited him to join their company. Maybe a member fell ill, left to marry, or inherited some money, and the troupe needed to fill its ranks.

We know this much for certain: A playwright named Robert Greene died in 1592, and shortly afterward, a pamphlet called *Groats-worth of Witte* was published in his name. There were doubts at the time about whether Greene actually wrote the slim volume, and today it's largely assumed that someone else was the author. But what makes this pamphlet interesting to modern scholars is that it contains a number of insults aimed at an unnamed actor and playwright, referred to as "an upstart Crow." Every clue in the piece—including quotes and references to blank verse—points to William Shakespeare as the upstart crow.

Will had arrived in London. Apparently, he was making quite a splash.

Blank Verse

Blank verse is a form of poetry written in unrhymed iambic pentameter.

An iamb is a pair of syllables with the stress on the second syllable, such as the word behold. If the stress is on the first of two syllables, as in happy, then the pair is called a trochee. If both syllables are stressed, as with the words tree trunk, we call it a spondee.

When used in poetry, these pairs of syllables are called feet. Iambic pentameter refers to a line with five feet, each of which is an iamb. For an example, we can look at the beginning of Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18":

*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.*

Try reading these lines aloud and stressing every other syllable, as in the version below, where the second syllable of each iamb appears in bold:

*Shall I com-**pare** thee to a **sum**-mer's **day**?
Thou **art** more **love**-ly **and** more **tem**-per-ate.*

3

Upstart Crow

Will was almost definitely a professional actor before any of his plays were performed. Somehow, he made it to London, and somehow—maybe through connections from Stratford or northern England—he became part of a company of actors (we don't know which company).

But how did Will the actor become Will the playwright?

Theater companies in Elizabethan England did not perform one play at a time. Some venues could hold more than two thousand spectators, and although London was then the third-biggest city in Europe, there were only two hundred thousand people in the whole city, not all of them able or excited to see a play. If a company performed the same play every night, their audiences would shrink as too many people would have already seen the performance. In order to keep attracting audiences and making money, companies had a number of plays that they staged in rotation. Often, they performed five or six different plays each week. By some estimations,

each company performed up to twenty new plays each year, along with roughly twenty old plays that they kept in rotation.

A lot of new plays were written and performed every year—so many that most of them are lost to time.

Lost Plays

There are dozens of plays from Elizabethan England that we only know existed because we know their titles. One reason for this is that playing companies guarded their scripts closely: They did not want other companies to steal them, and they did not want the public to read them at home. They wanted people to come to the theater and see their version of the play.

Also, paper was expensive, so even the actors in a play would not have the full script. Instead, each actor would receive a roll of paper strips with only their own lines and their cue lines, glued together. Some rolls were longer and some shorter—you could tell from the length of your roll how big a part you were playing. This is why the individual parts in a play became known as roles.

Will's first plays to be performed were likely his trilogy *King Henry VI, Part 1, Part 2, and Part 3*. Shakespeare may have had the idea for the plays himself, or he may have worked with others on a script that was already underway. When his fellow writers saw how talented he was, they might have stepped back and let him work—scholars think Will had already been trying his hand at

writing plays and that his comedies *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *The Taming of the Shrew* might have been written earlier, though they were not performed until later.

Order of Events

It's hard to know exactly when Will's plays came out. Performances often left no trace in the historical record, so literary researchers have had to make guesses about the order in which Will wrote his plays based on patterns in his writing, markers in time such as events or literary works mentioned in the plays, and whether a play is referenced in letters. These clues can help narrow down the period when the play might have first appeared. Still, most attempts to determine the exact order in which the plays were performed or written is educated guesswork.

Maybe Will was on the stage, acting a small part in the first performance of his first play. Maybe he saw eyes lighting up, heard the cheers and jeers when the players engaged the audience. Maybe a delighted smile broke across his face.

Will's three plays about Henry VI were very popular. After all, if Will had not been successful, Robert Greene—or whoever wrote *Groats-worth*—would probably not have written such horrible things about him. But of the twenty new plays being written for each acting company each year, why did Shakespeare's stand out?

Right up until the time that Will started writing, the most common type of play in England was the morality play. These plays came from medieval religious traditions and had characters who were not people but symbols. The heroes had names like Mankind or Youth; they were led into danger by villains called Pride, Riot, or Vice; and then, usually, they were saved with the help of characters such as Diligence, Humility, or Study. Though these plays were sometimes funny, their point was always to teach a lesson, and their endings were predictable.

Will's stories were not predictable, and his characters were not symbols. Shakespeare's kings, queens, nobles, and even peasants had big, messy emotions. They squabbled. They failed. This idea would have been strange and appealing to audiences who had been born and would die under the reign of a monarch, especially one like Queen Elizabeth, who presented an image of purity and perfection. Will's stories must have touched a nerve in the spirit of the era. With his unique poetic style and use of the newly popular blank verse, Will's wonderful writing captivated audiences.

morality: a system of rules about what is right and wrong

medieval: relating to European history from about 500 to 1500 CE

vice: sin or wickedness

diligence: consistent, earnest effort and hard work

The Popularity of Theater

A great many things combined to make theater such a popular art form in Shakespeare's day. These included a large increase in London's population during the sixteenth century; the new construction of many permanent playhouses; an increase in literacy, driven in part by the invention of the printing press; an education system that encouraged rhetoric; and a love of elaborate entertainment, largely driven by Queen Elizabeth herself. Shakespeare's plays weren't just popular with highly educated nobles and gentry. They were also big hits with groundlings—the common folk who stood in the dirt courtyard in front of the stage rather than sitting in raised stalls. Along with beautiful poetry, Will's plays had romance, music, action, and plenty of jokes.

Will followed his *Henry VI* trilogy with *Richard III*, another play loosely based on British history. This play served as a sequel to the *Henry VI* plays and featured a memorable antihero, the scheming hunchback villain King Richard III. The play was another great success. But just as Will's career was taking off, the plague returned.

In 1592, the same year that *Groats-worth* was published, London's theaters first closed due to a riot, then stayed closed because of the plague. Gentry and

rhetoric: the art of persuasive, powerful speaking

sequel: an artistic work that continues the story from a previous work

antihero: a central character who lacks traditionally heroic qualities; often a conflicted or even wicked figure

nobility fled the city for the country, but in the densely packed slums and tenements that housed much of London's working people, the disease spread quickly and confusingly; no one understood how or why. People died in droves.

That year, Thomas Nashe, one of Shakespeare's fellow playwrights, wrote the lines:

*Beauty is but a flower,
Which wrinkles will devour,
Brightness falls from the air,
Queens have died young, and fair,
Dust hath closed Helen's eye.
I am sick, I must die,
Lord have mercy on us.*

Eighteen thousand people died in London alone during the outbreak, though Nashe was not among them. Nor was Shakespeare. And nor did Shakespeare let the two-year break in performances—for the plague kept theaters closed until 1594—bring a stop to his writing.

Perhaps out of a need to support himself when his play-making income dried up, Will turned to writing poetry. Specifically, he wrote two long narrative poems: *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*.

tenements: apartment buildings in which people typically live in very close, unsanitary conditions



Poetry was generally popular in Elizabeth's England, but with no theater or other public arts—such as dances or musical performances—to attend, the private act of reading and writing poetry became the main artistic act of the moment. And into this moment fell Will's two poems.

While his *Henry VI* plays had been successful, these poems took him to a new level. They were a huge hit. Books were expensive, yet *Venus and Adonis* was so popular that new editions kept being published, all the way until 1610. For many Londoners, Will's plays remained less known than his poems until the plays were finally published in a big collection, seven years after his death.

4

The Lord Chamberlain's Men

In 1594, the plague outbreak ended. Will was turning thirty, and he had a choice: poetry or theater? It must have been a hard decision to make.

Acting was not a respected profession in Will's time. True, actors were expected to be talented musicians, dancers, and stage fighters, as well as particularly gifted at projecting their voices, pretending to be other people, and interacting with all sorts of audience members. But acting had long been a traveling profession, and Elizabethans did not typically trust outsiders. Although it was becoming more common to move to London to look for work, people in the country did not historically leave the place where they had been born, and anyone who did leave was regarded with suspicion. People wondered *why* someone had left where they were from. What were they running from? What had they done?

In fact, a law passed in 1572, when Will was eight years old, officially classed actors as vagabonds unless they had a noble patron. Vagabonds were people without a home or what was considered an honest job;

as vagabonds, actors could be arrested, whipped, put in stocks, and even branded. Even when players had a patron, plays themselves were still considered immoral by many, especially after morality plays fell out of fashion. Puritanical preachers spoke out against the new plays, saying they were examples of sinful behavior.

Patrons' good names were called on to protect a troupe from suspicion and abuse, and one of the earliest and most important of these patrons was a cousin of Queen Elizabeth: Henry Carey, the first Lord Hunsdon.

As early as 1564, Henry Carey served as protector and patron of a group of players. In 1585, Carey became lord chamberlain, and his troupe at that time became the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Then the closing of theaters in 1592 caused a great shuffling of London's theatrical talent, such that a new and improved Lord Chamberlain's Men emerged in 1594. In the years that followed, only the Admiral's Men would come even close to competing with them. The Lord Chamberlain's Men were poised to become the most celebrated acting company in London.

The Lord Chamberlain's Men performed at a theater owned by James Burbage, who had been an important advocate for theater for many decades and who was

stocks: a form of public punishment in which a person's hands or feet (or both) were restrained inside holes in planks of wood

puritanical: rigid or strict; a term that comes from these very preachers, who were Puritans—a group of English Protestants in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who were known for their severe views

responsible for helping build the first purpose-built theater in London in 1576—before then, plays were performed at inns or other venues. James had two sons, both of whom were members of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. Cuthbert, the elder, was more of a manager than an actor. But James’s second son, Richard Burbage, was a fine actor. Relatively unknown in 1594, Richard Burbage would soon become one of the most famous players of his day.

Under the patronage of Henry Carey, Richard was one of a group of “sharers” who led the company. Hired actors filled out the ranks, but these leaders were called *sharers* because they shared in both the profits and expenses of running the company. They had the most to gain if things went well but also the most to lose if the company became unpopular.

Another sharer, even more famous than the Burbages in 1594, was the Lord Chamberlain’s Men’s clown, William Kemp. It was common, at the beginning of Shakespeare’s career, for plays to end with a song and dance called a jig, which was separate from the play itself. Jigs were comical and often rude, and their funny lyrics were paired with leaping, acrobatic dancing and other escapades. Some people came to the theater after the play was over just to see the jig, and Will Kemp was the master of the jig.

Other known sharers include John Heminges, Augustine Phillips, George Bryan, and Thomas Pope. With these leading members gathered, the troupe could have then purchased plays from the many playwrights who worked independently at the time. Instead, they extended the invitation to become sharer to a certain young poet who, before the plague, had tried his hand at acting and even had a few successful plays.

No Girls Allowed

Theater companies, just like grammar schools, universities, and numerous jobs, were not open to women in Elizabeth's era. Because of this, younger male actors in dresses and makeup played the female roles, including famous characters like Juliet, Cleopatra, and Lady Macbeth.

It might have been a letter, a meeting, or a chance encounter one night at a pub, but at some point, Will was invited to join the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Returning to theater would not have been a straightforward choice. Poetry was both popular and plague-proof; it could be printed and sold whether or not the theaters were open or closed. Also, Will's poems were highly praised—surely his next collection would attract readers.

He must have known something crucial about himself in order to make the decision he made: He must have known that he truly loved theater. Maybe he was

consumed by a play or two he'd been working on during the shutdown. Maybe he sensed that the things he had to say demanded bodies on stage, an audience, and the two coming together to share a moment in time: the magical, powerful beauty that was only available in theater.

5

Flood of Fortune

Will became a sharer in the Lord Chamberlain's Men, and in the years after theaters reopened, he wrote like a comet blazing through the night sky: The company debuted roughly three new Shakespeare plays each year for the next five years. All in all, twenty-one of Will's plays had been staged by the year 1600.

Will's career and his abilities were growing steadily during this time, but we have few specific clues about his day-to-day life.

No Notes

There are many reasons why Will might have left no papers or letters that would give us hints about his life. He may have simply been a private person, but he also may have acted out of caution: Personal letters could prove dangerous if they fell into the wrong hands. Nearly anything that displeased the queen could be considered treason, and the punishment for treason was death. A letter from a government official of the era includes the line "Burn my letters, else shall I be afraid to write, the time is now so full of danger."

Likely Will rehearsed most mornings; he was still an actor in the company, and he would have to learn or practice the cues and lines for a different play almost every day. Then he would have acted in the play in the afternoon—most theater in the 1590s took place in open-topped buildings, relying on the sun to light the stage, so performances were almost always during the daytime. After the play, there would be company business meetings, tryouts for new actors, and new scripts by other playwrights to read and consider. And somewhere, outside these other commitments, Will also made time to write.

As an actor, it's believed Will took on smaller roles. He performed in most of his plays, as well as in many plays by other playwrights, but the only parts we have some evidence of him playing are the ghost of Hamlet's father in *Hamlet* and the role of Adam, a kind, elderly servant, in *As You Like It*.

An anecdote first recorded around 1680 points to Will spending most of his nights at home; it was said that "he was not a company keeper," and this makes sense considering all that he had to do. But some imaginative scholars, pointing to sonnets that Will published later in life, have developed a picture of the poet mixed up with

anecdote: a short, often oral retelling of an interesting or amusing story; considered unreliable in certain contexts

court intrigue and other drama. It's tempting to imagine Will's life being as filled with adventure as his tales. Perhaps, at times, it was.

The Sonnets

Shakespeare wrote sonnets—fourteen-line poems that end with a rhyming couplet—throughout his career, but most of them weren't published until 1609. They are almost all love poems, some beautiful and joyful, some full of suffering. They are addressed to two main subjects, known by scholars as the "Fair Youth" and the "Dark Lady," but it remains a mystery exactly who these people were. "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" begins Sonnet 18. "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun," says Sonnet 130. Whomever the sonnets were for, if anyone, they are some of the most remarkable love poetry ever written.

We do know that from 1594 onward, Queen Elizabeth herself often invited the Chamberlain's Men to perform at her palace in Whitehall, just west of London. Instead of acting in the daylight before crowds of groundlings, they would have performed by candlelight in Whitehall's great chamber, where the queen's court would be seated according to rank, likely dressed more extravagantly than even the players.

Throughout his career, Will would act for the queen and her successor, James I, roughly 170 times. One story has it that Elizabeth so liked the character of "the fat

intrigue: secret plots, conspiracies, or schemes

knight” Falstaff, from Will’s *Henry IV* plays, that she asked him to write a love story especially for Falstaff. Two weeks later, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* premiered—a comedy in which the roguish Falstaff tries to woo two married women at once, until they get the better of him with a series of tricks. Whether or not the story is true, it’s fun to imagine Queen Elizabeth laughing as Falstaff hides himself in a laundry basket.



Will’s artistic triumphs soon earned him another kind of success: In 1596, he was able to complete his father’s dream of securing a coat of arms for his family. Then, in 1597, he bought the second-largest house in his hometown of Stratford, called New Place. Will was now

roguish: naughty and untrustworthy, but in a mischievous, appealing way

a gentleman—a member of the gentry—by law, and he had a gentleman's house to prove it (though he continued to live in rented rooms while in London).

Anne Hathaway

Little is known about Will's relationship with his wife, Anne. It's generally thought that she stayed in Stratford with their children while Will spent most of his time in London, three days' journey away. Though a letter was recently discovered addressed to "Good Mrs. Shakspaire" in London, which might indicate that she sometimes stayed with her husband in the city, many people have concluded that Will and Anne's relationship was not good, based largely on the facts that she and Will probably lived apart most of the time and that Will published no love sonnets specifically dedicated to Anne. But who knows what wonderful letters Will might have written to her—letters that were later destroyed or simply lost? Like so much in Shakespeare's life, his relationship with his family is more a subject for speculation than a topic we have real insight into.

In the 1590s, Will wrote many plays that are still enormously popular today—more than four hundred years later! These include *The Comedy of Errors*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *As You Like It*, *Julius Caesar*, the two parts of *Henry IV*, and more.

Audiences were captivated, and still are, by the tragic love poetry of *Romeo and Juliet*, the zany mix-ups of *The Comedy of Errors*, and the madcap whimsy of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which the adventures of lovers, fairies, and a crew of bumbling actors all

intertwine in the woods outside Athens. But while there was a place for the clown Will Kemp in each of these plays, Shakespeare was looking to create more than easy laughs or pretty, memorable lines. He was constantly aspiring to bring the characters in his plays closer to the complex highs and lows of being human—to get at great truths through the make-believe of the stage. In *As You Like It*, Will wrote, “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players.” But he also wanted the reverse to be true: for the characters in his stories to be complicated, funny, strange, unique, and flawed—just like real men and women. Shakespeare wanted his stage to reflect life.

And so Will became very deliberate in the way he wrote his characters. He understood that in many old stories, characters wanted only one thing, such as to marry a specific person, to become king, or to get revenge. But Will knew that real people are often conflicted. What they want can change from moment to moment. Will showed this kind of human complexity in his *Henry IV* plays, in which King Henry IV’s son, Prince Hal, has two father figures: his own father and a kind of mentor named Sir John Falstaff (Queen Elizabeth’s supposed favorite). The king is grave and serious while Falstaff is mischievous and irresponsible but also fun and full of love for life. The push and pull of these two influences is

aspiring: desiring and working toward a specific goal

deliberate: conscious and intentional

what turns the plays into such a powerful human tragedy: Which one will win the prince's soul, when he so clearly feels drawn to both?

Will also continued to experiment with plot. Often, he borrowed the outlines of older stories, then mixed them with original ideas to transform them. For instance, in *The Merchant of Venice*, he used the structure of a comedy but included prejudice, pain, and loss. In *As You Like It*, he changed the way that a love story works: Instead of rival suitors or parents (or dragons or trolls) standing in the way, what keeps the lovers apart is that they both need to grow a bit, to get to know themselves and each other—even through tricks and disguises!—before they can honestly commit.

Tragedy, Comedy, History

When Will's plays were first published together, they were broken into three categories: tragedies, comedies, and histories. All of Will's plays contain both tragic and comic elements, but they were organized by how they end: The tragedies have sad endings and the comedies have happy endings, while the history plays are based (though often loosely) on the stories of real rulers.

*Many years later, the scholar F. S. Boas introduced a fourth genre. He wrote that "at the close" of certain plays "our feeling is neither simple joy nor pain." Theatergoers were instead left thoughtful, possibly even perplexed. These plays that didn't quite fit the category they were in—such as the upsetting "comedies" *The Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure*—Boas called "problem plays."*

Another tool that Will developed as his career grew was the soliloquy. A soliloquy is a speech in which a character speaks their thoughts aloud, often working through questions and troubles with the audience as a witness and an ally. In Shakespeare's day, actors never pretended that the audience wasn't there. In broad daylight, they spoke directly to the people watching, involving them in the drama and encouraging them to respond. Will began using soliloquies early in his career, especially with *Richard III*. But knowing Richard's thoughts only showed audiences his secret, single-minded villainy. Later, in *Julius Caesar*, Will used the soliloquy to reveal the conflict troubling the character Brutus. This is one example of Will using old tricks to show the new lessons he was learning about character.

The foundation that held up all of Will's other innovations was language. He had a tremendous skill with words, and he was also inventive. If he could not find the right word, he made it up, borrowed it from another language, or used an existing word in a new way, such as turning a noun into a verb.

But all the wonderful words and poetic lines would only have been so effective if Will had not also been pushing himself constantly to better understand the human soul. Will used his imagination to put himself in the position of countless characters—to find the words

they would speak, to feel what they would feel and know what they would do. What he soon came up against was the vast, unpredictable unknowability of the human mind. The question then was how to reveal this onstage.

This question soon drove Will to use all of his tools—conflicted characters, inventive plot structures, soliloquies, poetry, and more—to create an incredibly different, astounding new play. But Will’s story is not just one of continual breakthrough, invention, and achievement. Even with what little we know, we know he must have suffered a great amount of uncertainty and heartache.

Words, Words, Words

Have you ever had too much of a good thing? Or felt something in your heart of hearts? Or worn your heart on your sleeve? Or gone on a wild goose chase? If so, you already know some of the common phrases that William Shakespeare introduced into the English language. The list is a remarkable one. Here are just a few of the words and phrases we have today thanks to Shakespeare:

<i>alligator</i>	<i>star-crossed lovers</i>
<i>critic</i>	<i>melted into thin air</i>
<i>gossip</i>	<i>neither rhyme nor reason</i>
<i>puppy dog</i>	<i>what the dickens</i>
<i>skim milk</i>	<i>laughingstock</i>
<i>worthless</i>	<i>with bated breath</i>
<i>zany</i>	<i>All that glitters is not gold.</i>

unknowability: the quality of being impossible to know or understand

6

Slings & Arrows

Despite all Will's success, his tragedies were not confined to the theater.

In the summer of 1596, Will's company lost its patron: Henry Carey died. At the same time, there were renewed calls by clergy and city leaders to put an end to theater. They considered the playhouses hotbeds of disease and civil unrest. For a time, at least, these calls were successful: Plays were banned from being performed at any inns within London. There were only a couple of purpose-built theaters, just outside the city limits, and we don't know whether plays were still allowed in these; if they were banned, we don't know for how long. What we know is that it was an uncertain time for Shakespeare and his fellows.

Fortunately, they did not go long without a patron. Henry Carey's eldest son, George Carey, soon took the reins as protector of Will's company. George had the title

hotbeds: places or situations where a particular activity, often something undesirable like crime, disease, or unrest, thrives and develops rapidly

of second Baron Hunsdon, and so the Lord Chamberlain's Men became Lord Hunsdon's Men for a short while. But before a year had passed, George was appointed lord chamberlain, just like his father had been. The company was once again the Lord Chamberlain's Men.

Along with the loss of the company's patron and the partial ban on plays, Will suffered a much more personal loss: His son, Hamnet, died in the summer of 1596, less than a month after the death of Henry Carey.

Hamnet Shakespeare was buried in Stratford-upon-Avon on August 11, 1596. Will must have traveled from London. He may have known that the eleven-year-old Hamnet was sick. He may have gotten to see the boy before he passed, or perhaps he lost his son without getting to say goodbye. We do not know.

Will published no elegy for Hamnet, but that same year, he wrote these lines, spoken by a grieving mother in his play *King John*:

*Grief fills the room up of my absent child,
Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,
Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,
Remembers me of all his gracious parts,
Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form;
Then, have I reason to be fond of grief?*

elegy: a serious, thoughtful poem, usually lamenting or in tribute to someone who has died



How did Will cope with this loss? He wrote mostly lighthearted comedies in the following years; maybe he was keeping his writing at a distance from his feelings. Perhaps these plays distracted him and helped him deal with the hurt until enough time had passed that he could manage his emotions.

Around this time, Shakespeare and Will Kemp appear to have had a falling out, one that eventually led to them parting ways. Kemp left the Lord Chamberlain's Men around 1599, leaving the troupe without its celebrated clown. But this was not the worst of their professional troubles.

In February 1597, James Burbage, father of Richard and Cuthbert, as well as the owner of the theater where the Lord Chamberlain's Men performed, also passed away. Shortly after, the lease ended on the theater he had owned. Known simply as the Theatre, this building had been built with the help of Burbage in 1576. But Giles Allen, who owned the land on which the Theatre stood, said he would no longer lease it out for plays to be performed. The Lord Chamberlain's Men were without a home.

They performed at a nearby theater called the Curtain but with less success than they'd had. At a loss for how to support themselves, the company resorted to selling off plays to be printed.

The Lord Chamberlain's Men did not have their own printing press, so most of the profits would go to the publisher, not to the company. There was also the risk that if people owned the plays, they wouldn't need to come to the theater to hear the words—they could read them at home. It certainly seemed better for the company not to publish their plays.

But hard times forced their hands. *Richard III*; *Richard II*; *Henry IV, Part 1*; and *Love's Labour's Lost*—all of which were particularly popular at the time—were each sold to a publisher and appeared in print. It might have felt for Will like watching his plays slip through his fingers. Even so, it would only keep the company afloat a short while; they needed a long-term solution if they were going to keep from having to disband. They needed a theater.

afloat: literally, floating on water, but often used to mean staying out of debt

7

The Globe

In 1576, when James Burbage signed a lease to build the Theatre on Giles Allen's land, the lease had an interesting and important clause: Though Allen would remain the owner of the land, the building itself would belong to Burbage.

After James died, his sons, Cuthbert and Richard, came into possession of the lease. But Allen refused to renew it, leaving the Burbages, along with the rest of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, at a loss. According to the original agreement, the Burbages owned the Theatre. But they did not own the land that the Theatre was built on, so they could not perform there. For two years, the building stood empty.

Then the company did something radical.

Three days after Christmas Day 1598, as snow fell heavy over London, the Lord Chamberlain's Men gathered at the Theatre. Other than England's armory in the Tower of London, large weapons were not generally found in the city. But there was one noteworthy

clause: a particular section or requirement of a legal contract

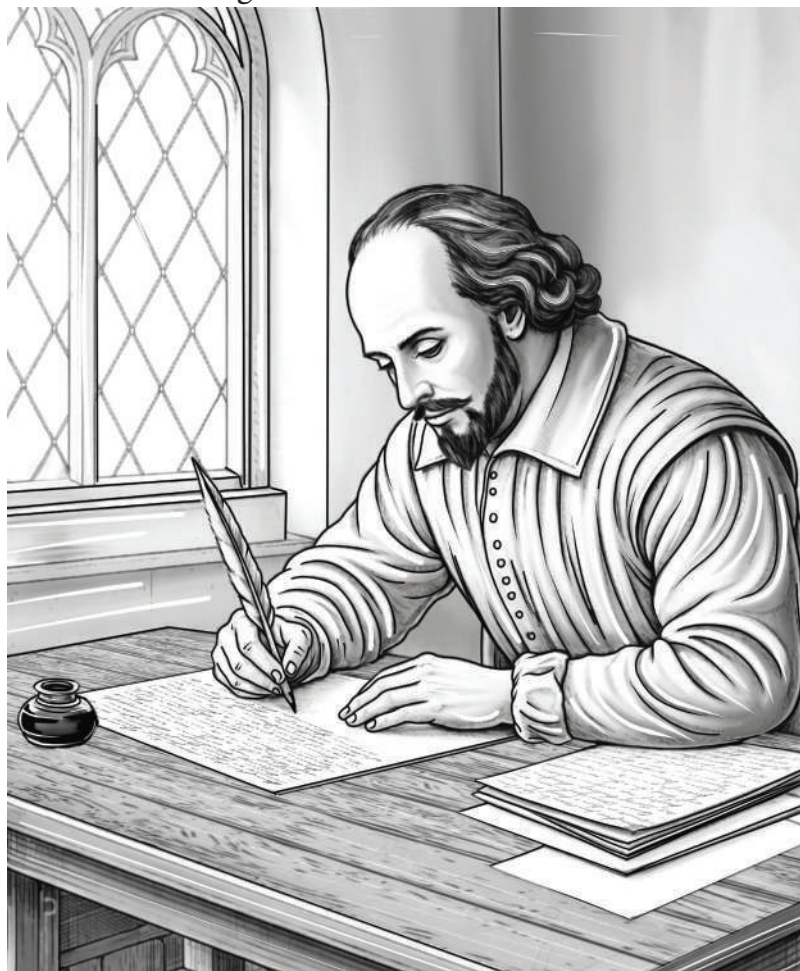
exception: Theaters often had their own small arsenals, which they kept on hand for stage combat. This explains how the Lord Chamberlain's Men, along with some hired muscle, the master builder Peter Street, and about a dozen workers, arrived on Giles Allen's land bearing "swords, daggers, bills, axes, and such like." These arms made sure no one interfered as the men dismantled the Theatre.

Giles Allen was away for the holidays, and London had no regular police force. The few friends of Allen's who tried to stop the deconstruction were easily chased off. The crew worked hard, and before long, they had every last piece of timber loaded onto wagons and carried south, away from the northern suburb called Shoreditch, which had been the working home of the Lord Chamberlain's Men for five years.

Peter Street oversaw construction of a new theater in a neighborhood known as Southwark, across the River Thames from the official walled city of London. Just as in Shoreditch, the troupe would be safer here from city officials' habit of banning performances within the city.

Because the Burbages couldn't afford all the expenses of the reconstruction on their own, they invited five of the Lord Chamberlain's Men to invest in the new building and become part owners. This is how Will became a partner in the newly constructed Globe Theatre.

Will now had a share in the profits of both the Lord Chamberlain's Men and the Globe. As long as theater remained popular—and wasn't closed by another pandemic—his financial woes were over. Soon, he sat down and began to write one of his greatest plays, one that many scholars consider a turning point both in his career and in English literature as a whole: *Hamlet*.



Borrowed Plots

Like many plays that Shakespeare wrote, Hamlet isn't an original narrative. There was already a play called Hamlet, which was itself based on a much older Danish story about a prince named Amleth. Only rarely did Will come up with his own plot from scratch. He often borrowed plots from other stories, from ancient Greek and Roman texts to medieval Italian and English poetry. Then he changed the plots to suit his needs, spending energy on the parts of the stories that interested him more: the characters and the language.

It can be hard to pinpoint exactly what is unique about *Hamlet*. Thousands of essays have been dedicated to the subject, and—unless another asteroid-style event interferes—thousands more are yet to be written. But part of the revolution of *Hamlet* is that it centers not on a straightforward series of actions but rather on the human ability to experience a moral dilemma; Will took an old story about revenge, and he turned it into a play about thought. *Hamlet* shows the workings of a conscience. This shift—expressed through soliloquy, blank verse and prose, a play-within-a-play, and Shakespeare's many other literary tools—turns a worn-out story into one that is timeless.

dilemma: a tough problem or situation in which a hard choice must be made, often between equally troubling alternatives

conscience: an inner “voice” or feeling that helps someone tell right from wrong

prose: writing that is distinct from poetry and doesn't conform to any poetic meter; often used by Shakespeare to make certain characters' dialogue sound more informal or casual, in contrast to characters who speak in blank verse; *Much Ado About Nothing* is a rare example of a Shakespeare play written almost completely in prose rather than blank verse

It is believed that Will worked on *Hamlet* from 1599 until 1601 or later. There were multiple versions of the play, which indicates that he spent more time on it than on any of his other works. In the two most official versions that we have today, the beginning and end of *Hamlet* are the same, but the motivations throughout are quite different. Also, these two versions of the story are too long to have been performed by Shakespeare's troupe; in winter months, when the days were shorter, the last act of the play would have been performed without daylight. Playgoers would not have been able to see the actors, and the actors would not have been able to see each other during a dangerous sword fight. Whatever version of *Hamlet* was actually performed at the Globe, it must have been much shorter than the play we have today.

Shakespeare spent a lot of time working on these two versions of *Hamlet* (and possibly others), even when neither of them could have been put on stage. It seems his focus with *Hamlet* was not just to have it performed but to work out for himself both the meaning and the value of human life. "What a piece of work is a man," muses Prince Hamlet. Human beings, he marvels, are "the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals—and yet, to me," he goes on, "what is this quintessence of dust?"

motivations: the reasons people have for doing something

paragon: the best or highest version

quintessence: the most perfect example

Life, in *Hamlet*, can feel both miraculous and empty, full of possibility and yet—as Shakespeare knew all too well—fleeting. It makes perfect sense that the conflicted, deep-thinking, deep-feeling young man at the center of the play has a name so similar to that of Will's lost son, Hamnet.

Quartos and Folios

We have three versions of Hamlet from Shakespeare's time: the First Quarto, published in 1603, also known as the "bad quarto"; the Second Quarto, published in 1604; and the First Folio, published in 1623.

The versions are called quarto or folio because of how they were printed. A quarto—from the Latin word for "four"—was printed on pieces of paper that were folded twice, into quarters. These quartered sheets were then trimmed and bound into small booklets. Quartos were how single plays were often printed. With a folio, the paper was folded only once, so the pages were usually twice as large, and the book was more substantial. When Shakespeare's plays were published as a collection for the first time, they were printed in folio form.

It's believed that the "bad quarto" of Hamlet was sold to publishers by an anonymous hired actor who had played the small role of the guard Marcellus. Why? Because even though this version is missing a lot of text, and what it has is mostly wrong or paraphrased, the scenes with Marcellus in them are surprisingly accurate.

Over the next decade, Will continued to write great tragedies—*Macbeth*, *Othello*, *King Lear*—along with many other remarkable plays, all of which clearly bear the marks of the breakthrough he had with *Hamlet*: They are all stories in which conscience and moral conflicts are the driving force. But these other plays would not be performed by the Lord Chamberlain's Men. This was because in 1603, Queen Elizabeth I died.

The queen had been a great supporter of the arts, and her death might have been a great source of worry for Will and his company. But their worries were soon relieved: Elizabeth's successor liked Will's plays and his troupe of actors so much that he took over as their patron. Shortly after James I became king of England, the Lord Chamberlain's Men became the King's Men.

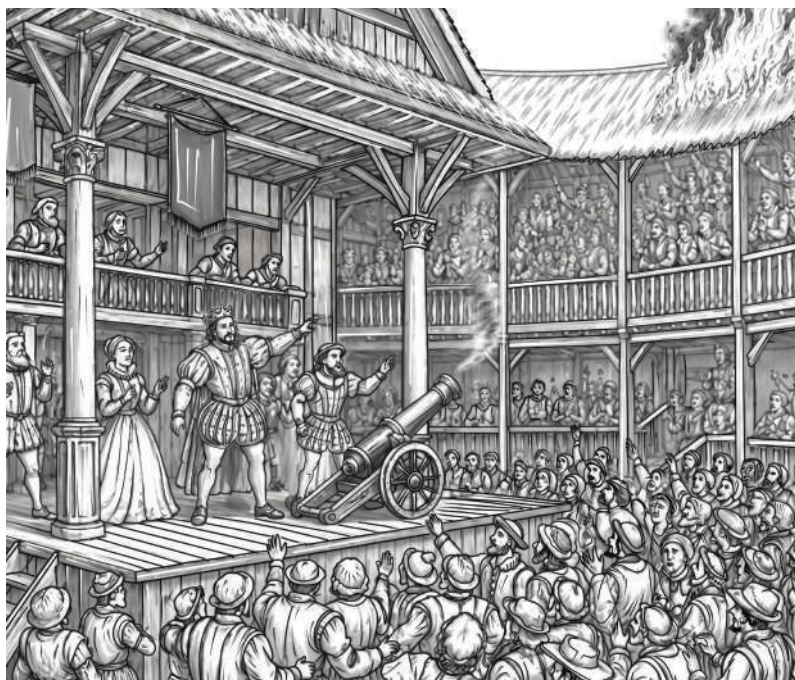
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A New Place

As the King's Men, Will and his troupe performed at court even more often than they had for Elizabeth; after all, they were now the official royal company. Plague returned to London in 1603, but theater continued to do well under James, and soon the King's Men had permission to perform inside the London city limits, in their own indoor theater, called Blackfriars. No longer considered vagabonds, several of the King's Men—including Shakespeare, John Heminges, and Henry Condell—had or would soon have a coat of arms; they were gentlemen.

Around 1613, Will began collaborating on plays with an up-and-coming playwright named John Fletcher. No longer “an upstart Crow,” Shakespeare was approaching fifty years old, he was a famous elder of the London theater world, and new, young playwrights were hoping for their own big breaks. Together with Fletcher, Will wrote *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, *Henry VIII*, and *Cardenio*, the last of which is now lost. After this short period of working together, Will stepped aside, and Fletcher became the primary playwright for the King's Men. He would become one of the most important writers of the

following era, but his plays would not be performed in the same theater that Will had worked and acted in. This is because on June 29, 1613, during a performance of *Henry VIII*, the actor playing Henry VIII made a grand entrance, and a small cannon was fired as part of the fanfare. This cannon did not have shot, but it did have gunpowder stuffed down with cloth called wadding. It's thought that this wadding landed on the thatch roof of the Globe and quietly set it ablaze. The play went on, and no one in the audience seemed to notice the smoke or pay it much mind. By the time the alarm was sounded, it was too late. Though everyone got out safely, the Globe burned to the ground in less than an hour.



Will didn't see the fire; he had already moved back to his hometown on the River Avon. The boy who had left his disgraced father's house sometime in the 1580s had returned a well-off member of the gentry, owner of multiple houses, multiple theaters (Will had a share in the Blackfriars, and the Globe would soon be rebuilt), and many plots of farmland. He was also the greatest playwright of the age—or perhaps, as Ben Jonson would later write of him, “He was not of an age, but for all time!”

Though Will had inherited the house where he'd been born, he had leased that building out as an inn. When he returned to Stratford, he moved into the second-biggest house in town, where his wife and two daughters had been living since 1597: New Place.

Will died in 1616. He was fifty-two years old. We don't know what he died of, but we are the infinitely lucky heirs to what he left behind, largely thanks to the efforts of two men. In 1623, two of the King's Men, John Heminges and Henry Condell, collected and finally published *Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies*. We now know this volume as the First Folio. Without it, we might have lost nearly half of Will's plays.

heirs: people who inherit

Many scientists think that an asteroid struck Earth before the one that created Chicxulub, one that was even bigger: about the size of Mars. This impact, roughly 4.5 billion years ago, would have all but destroyed both the asteroid and our planet. But over time, incredibly, pieces of Earth and the asteroid came together to make our moon. The moon and the impact together changed Earth's climate and tides, turning a barren rock into a place that could sustain complex life.

If someone had gone to see a play in London in the 1580s, gone away for thirty years, then come back to the city to see a show, what they would have encountered would have been, to them, a *new place*: a world of theater they would hardly recognize. Stories, characters, and language had all changed; the morality play was no more. Now the stage was filled with *life*. Theatergoers might have felt like the young heroine of the final play Shakespeare wrote on his own, *The Tempest*: "O, brave new world / That has such people in 't!"

On the other hand, if someone in London had gone to see a play in 1610, then time traveled to our time and saw a play today, the costumes, technology, and world outside might be different beyond imagining, but the play might be the very same—especially if it was written by William Shakespeare. The plays Will created are still as beautiful,

astounding, ambiguous, and revelatory today as when he wrote them. Simply put, they are timeless.

Will's words and phrases have been borrowed by many, many authors over the years, especially to use as titles. They continuously appear on television, in music and movies, *as* movies, and they are still a part of everyday speech. But Will's greater legacy is not his popularity or timelessness but his insight into what it means to be human. The vitality, complexity, conflicts, and joys of his plays mirror our own minds. This is why so many people who read one of Will's plays or see one performed—or even perform in it—are gifted with new thoughts, new ideas, and new outlooks. Will changed our entire idea of what a story might be or might do. He used plays to show us ourselves. That is the greatest work that a writer can do, and it became the goal for many great writers who would follow.

ambiguous: having more than one possible meaning; able to be understood in more than one way

revelatory: giving new knowledge or information, often of a truth that has a surprising or exalting effect

insight: deep understanding

vitality: the state of being strong, active, and energetic; liveliness

A Timeline of Shakespeare's Plays

We don't know the exact date on which many of Shakespeare's plays were written or first performed, but scholars have done their best to put together a timeline of his works. Here they are in (as near as scholars can guess) the order in which they were completed.

<i>Henry VI, Part 2</i>	1590–91	Likely Shakespeare's first play, and also the first of his many histories, this is the story of English king Henry VI, who reigned roughly one hundred years before Queen Elizabeth I.
<i>Henry VI, Part 3</i>	1590–91	In this completion of Henry VI's story, he loses the war for the crown to the York dynasty and is eventually imprisoned and killed.
<i>Henry VI, Part 1</i>	1591–92	This "prequel" tells the beginning of Henry VI's story, including his marriage to his queen, Margaret, and the start of the civil war over the crown.
<i>The Taming of the Shrew</i>	1592	In this comedy, a father will not allow his younger daughter to be wooed until a man dares to marry his sharp-tongued older daughter, Katherine.
<i>Titus Andronicus</i>	1591–94	Shakespeare's first tragedy tells the very violent story of a Roman general, Titus, and the cycle of revenge that he sets in motion when he captures Tamora, queen of the Goths, and kills her oldest son.
<i>Richard III</i>	1592–94	King Richard III was part of the York family that defeated Henry VI. In this continuation of the <i>Henry VI</i> history cycle, Richard is a wily villain who will stop at nothing to win the crown.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

<i>The Comedy of Errors</i>	1592–94	Based on ancient Roman comedies, this wonderfully silly play tells the story of two different sets of twins, both separated at birth, who get into a series of mix-ups in the city of Ephesus, where one set is looking for their long-lost brothers.
<i>The Two Gentlemen of Verona</i>	1594–95	This comedy features two best friends, Valentine and Proteus, who meet with conflict when Proteus decides to desert his sweetheart, Julia, in order to pursue Sylvia, the woman whom Valentine loves.
<i>Love's Labour's Lost</i>	1594–96	In this high-spirited comedy, the young king of Navarre and his three friends vow to dedicate themselves to study and solitude for three years . . . but then the princess of France and her three ladies-in-waiting arrive in Navarre, and romantic mischief ensues.
<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	1595–96	In this magical comedy, lovers, fairies, and some bumbling workmen attempting to put on a play get into a series of adventures during one strange night in the woods outside Athens.
<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	1595–96	This great tragedy, set in Verona, Italy, sees Shakespeare's "star-cross'd lovers" fall in love despite the disapproval of their families, who have been feuding with each other for many years.
<i>Richard II</i>	1595–96	With this play, Shakespeare began a new cycle of histories. King Richard II reigned in the late 1300s, and this play tells the story of the end of his reign, in which he surrendered the crown to his cousin, who would go on to become King Henry IV.
<i>King John</i>	1595–97	This play tells the story of the troubled reign of King John, who ruled England in the early 1200s.

A TIMELINE OF SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

<i>The Merchant of Venice</i>	1596–97	The first of Shakespeare's plays to be described by later scholars as a "problem play," this work tells the story of a Christian merchant, Antonio; a Jewish moneylender, Shylock; and a bargain made between them that leads to terrible consequences.
<i>Henry IV, Part 1</i>	1597–98	A continuation of the history cycle begun with <i>Richard II</i> , this play recounts a rebellion during the reign of King Henry IV. It also tells the story of the king's wayward son Prince Hal and his friendship with the larger-than-life troublemaker Sir John Falstaff.
<i>Henry IV, Part 2</i>	1597–98	In this continuation of the story of Henry IV, Hal, and Falstaff, the country faces another rebellion, and Hal eventually becomes king after his father's death.
<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>	1598	In this witty comedy, the soldier Benedick and the clever Beatrice fall for each other despite their "merry war" of mutual mockery, and the young lovers Claudio and Hero find their love threatened by the villainous Don John.
<i>Henry V</i>	1599	This final play in Shakespeare's second history cycle tells the story of King Henry V (once Prince Hal) and his great military victory in France.
<i>Julius Caesar</i>	1599	This tragedy recounts the assassination of the Roman emperor Julius Caesar.
<i>As You Like It</i>	1599	This sparkling comedy features a young man named Orlando who falls in love with the witty Rosalind. Through various complications, they both find themselves in the Forest of Arden, where Rosalind has disguised herself as a boy.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

<i>Hamlet</i>	1600	Widely considered one of the most brilliant plays of all time, <i>Hamlet</i> tells the story of a prince who is urged by the ghost of his father to perform a violent act of revenge. Hamlet struggles with his conscience and with the corrupt world of the court around him as he tries to honor his father's demand.
<i>The Merry Wives of Windsor</i>	1597–1601	In this comedy featuring the character of Falstaff (from the <i>Henry IV</i> plays), two clever women foil his mischief when he sets out to woo them both at once.
<i>Twelfth Night</i>	1601	Shakespeare's last and greatest pure comedy tells the story of twins Viola and Sebastian, who are shipwrecked in the country of Illyria, where they meet with many adventures and are eventually reunited.
<i>Troilus and Cressida</i>	1601–2	In this thorny problem play set during the Trojan War, the lovers of the title, Troilus and Cressida, are eventually torn apart by the conflict that has been raging around their city for ten years.
<i>All's Well That Ends Well</i>	1603–6	In this work, considered both a comedy and a problem play, a smart young woman named Helena goes to great lengths to win the love of a young man, Bertram, who doesn't love her back.
<i>Othello</i>	1604	This tragedy features a brave general, Othello—a Black man who is referred to in the play as a "Moor"—who meets with a terrible fate after the wicked Iago convinces him that his wife, the beautiful Desdemona, has been unfaithful.
<i>Measure for Measure</i>	1604	In this problem play set in Vienna, a sly duke disguises himself in order to test the deputy that he assigns to run the city in his place.

A TIMELINE OF SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

<i>Timon of Athens</i>	1604–6	In this play, possibly co-written with Thomas Middleton, a wealthy lord in Athens loses his fortune and discovers that all his friends and supporters were only after his money.
<i>King Lear</i>	1605–6	One of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies, this play features an old king who struggles with madness and the loss of power after dividing his kingdom between his three daughters, eventually discovering that the daughter whom he has scorned loves him the most truly.
<i>Macbeth</i>	1606	This play is an eerie and tragic retelling of the story of the Scottish king Macbeth, who comes to power after receiving a prophecy from three witches and then killing the current king, Duncan.
<i>Antony and Cleopatra</i>	1606–7	In this tragic romance, the Roman leader Mark Antony and the Egyptian queen Cleopatra find their great love torn apart by the conflict between their countries.
<i>Coriolanus</i>	1608	In this tragedy, despite his many victories, the general Coriolanus angers the people of Rome and has to flee the city, eventually siding with his enemy against his own countrymen.
<i>Pericles</i>	1608	<i>Pericles</i> was the first of a set of plays that later scholars would call the romances. The version that survives was almost definitely written in part by George Wilkins; it tells the story of the many adventures of a brave, seafaring prince and, eventually, of the wife and daughter he reunites with after thinking them long lost.
<i>Cymbeline</i>	1610	Named after an ancient British king, this play actually tells the story of Cymbeline's daughter, the courageous Imogen, and her attempts to follow her heart in order to stay with the young man she loves, Posthumus Leonatus.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

<i>The Winter's Tale</i>	1611	This play tells the story of Leontes, a king whose baseless jealousy over his wife, Hermione, threatens to ruin many lives, and of the miraculous reunion and reconciliation of his family, many years later.
<i>The Tempest</i>	1611	The last play Shakespeare wrote without a co-author—and the only one whose plot he did not base on existing sources—tells the story of Prospero, an old enchanter on a magical island who learns to give up his desire for revenge.
<i>Henry VIII</i>	1613	Co-written with John Fletcher, this play recounts part of the reign of Elizabeth I's father, ending with his marriage to Anne Boleyn and the birth of the baby who would grow up to be Queen Elizabeth.
<i>Cardenio</i>	1613	Scholars think that the plot of this lost play, co-written with John Fletcher, was probably based on an episode from Miguel de Cervantes's <i>Don Quixote</i> .
<i>The Two Noble Kinsmen</i>	1613–14	Co-written with John Fletcher and based on "The Knight's Tale" from Geoffrey Chaucer's <i>The Canterbury Tales</i> , this play tells the story of Palamon and Arcite, cousins and best friends who are imprisoned together after a battle and then become rivals when they fall in love with the same woman, whom they see through the window of their jail.

Discussion Questions

1. Will's father was a glover. Do you think that being the son of a glover influenced what Will decided to do? What other parts of Will's upbringing might have been important for making him who he was?
2. If Shakespeare had gone to the University of Oxford, do you think he would have become a playwright? Why or why not?
3. Have you ever acted in a play? Did you like it, or do you think you would like it? Why or why not?
4. There are many guesses about what Will did in the "lost years" before we know that he was in London. What do you think happened during that time?
5. If Shakespeare were alive today, do you think he would still be a playwright? What might he have done instead?
6. What were some of the reasons that plays and theaters were closed in Elizabethan England? Do you agree or disagree with these reasons?

7. For a play to happen in Shakespeare's day (or in ours), different people had to be responsible for costumes, backdrops and stages, music, acting and singing, writing, managing and promoting, and much else. Which part of making a play do you think you would like most? Which part would you like least? Why?
8. Will Shakespeare, Will Kemp, and the Burbages were all able to make plays in part because of the protection and support of people like the lord chamberlain and the queen. If you were able to be a patron, who or what would you support, and how?
9. Will eventually could afford to buy a house for himself in London, but he chose to buy a house in his hometown instead—a house where his wife and daughters could live. Why do you think he bought the house in Stratford instead of one in London?
10. Will's plays permanently changed the way that stories are told. Do you think that Will knew that he was making an impact on other writers, or was he only trying to do a better job with his own writing?
11. Imagine you got to see a play at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre. What would it be like? Where would you be in the theater, and what would you see?

12. Much of Shakespeare's most famous writing is in iambic pentameter. Try writing a few lines in iambic pentameter, then saying them out loud. Do you like the way they sound? (If you need help remembering iambic pentameter, flip back to the sidebar about blank verse on page 19.)

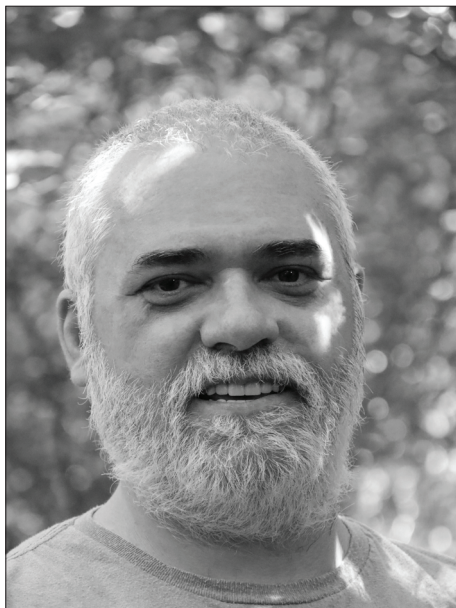
Meet the Author



Beau Lee Gambold lived in Texas, Tennessee, Colorado, Missouri, and Mississippi all by the age of nine. In high school he was nationally ranked in karate, and after college he got to travel and work for a presidential campaign. When the campaign ended, Beau joined the Peace Corps, where he spent almost three years in Thailand. While in Thailand, Beau became a Buddhist monk for a short time, and he also fell in love with books. When he came back to America, he put everything else aside, got a job in a restaurant, and started writing. He hasn't stopped since.

Today Beau lives just outside New York City with his wife, his baby daughter, two very specific cats, and a garden overflowing with tomatoes and dahlias. His wife is a theater genius and a Pulitzer finalist, and she first introduced him to Shakespeare, often by picking a play at random and telling him all about it on long subway rides home. The love of his life soon brought him around to a shared love of the Bard, and today Beau is at work on a number of Shakespeare-related stories and books. When he isn't writing, Beau can often be found in his garden or in the woods, hiking and looking for mushrooms to eat. He usually has a camera with him—he loves taking pictures—but he almost always has a book!

Meet the Illustrator



Ivan Pešić was born in Blace, Serbia, in 1975. In 2000, Ivan moved to Belgrade, Serbia, where he studied graphic design in college. Unhappy with the political and economic situation in Serbia, Ivan emigrated to Virginia, USA, in 2005. Ivan and his wife, Alisa, have two children, Tara and Luka. His work can be seen in many galleries in Virginia, Washington D.C., North Carolina, and Georgia. Ivan has also donated his paintings to public schools and charity organizations. The primary medium Ivan uses is acrylic and oil paints; however, he also likes to experiment with different mediums and techniques.

Aside from painting, Ivan has done pencil drawings, wall murals, mixed media art, photography, graphic design, and more. In his work, he reconstructs dreams, fairy tales, nursery rhymes, lullabies—the pieces of our lives and memories that are a part of us. Every piece of his artwork tells a story, stories with a hero, a villain, with action, movement, and other elements that give his work life and energy. Ivan's work can be viewed on his website: *www.ipartstudio.com*.

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