

Hello, and welcome to the Renaissance English History Podcast. I'm your host, Heather Teysko, and I'm a storyteller who makes history accessible because I believe it's a pathway to understanding humanity and our place in the universe. This episode, number 46 is on Shakespeare, because this month we are celebrating both his birthday and the 400th anniversary of his death.

But before I get started, a few reminders. Firstly, please check out the Agora Podcast Network, of which this podcast is a proud member. The Agora podcast of the month is actually a collection of podcasts from Podcastnic, who produce the Secret Cabinet, History of Germany, Bohemian, and lots of other great history podcasts. Check it out at <http://www.podcastnic.com>.

Also, I have a book coming out on April 15. It's a novel called Sideways and Backwards, a Novel of Time Travel and Self Discovery. It's about a contemporary woman who accidentally travels to Cambridge circa 1539. This is my first novel, and I'm so so excited about it. The ebook is only 2.99, and if you preorder it before April 15 when it's released, you will also receive a free copy of the audiobook, narrated by me. I would love it if you would check it out - you can go to [sidewaysandbackwardsbook.com](http://sidewaysandbackwardsbook.com) or follow the link from the Englandcast site at <http://www.Englandcast.com>. And if you're listening after April 15, don't worry, you'll still be able to buy both the ebook and the audio book! Just go to the link for more information!

Ok, so let's start our talk on the Bard, William Shakespeare, shall we? A reminder that there are show notes available at [Englandcast.com](http://Englandcast.com) with lists of resources and lots of good information to follow up and learn more. You can't do Shakespeare properly in a half hour episode of a podcast by an amateur, so this is really meant to be an introduction. As I said, I've put together a list of resources to learn more on the site. For those of you who are Shakespeare aficionado's, you might find this brief introduction offensive, and for that, I apologize. I do plan on doing more in depth episodes on certain aspects of Shakespeare in the future - perhaps, for example, we can look at an individual work and examine how it fits into what was happening in England at the time. Or what we can surmise about Elizabethan society based on Shakespeare's portrayals of marriage and love. But for now, given that I've never talked about him before, which is clearly a huge oversight on my part, I am just going to do the most basic of basic introductions to his life.

Also, I should note that there are 400 years worth of conspiracy theories as to who Shakespeare really was. Mark Twain famously said that "So far as anybody actually knows and can prove, Shakespeare of Stratford-on-Avon never wrote a play in his life." There isn't a lot that is known about Shakespeare's life, and how he wrote his plays. He was a very private man. For purposes of this podcast, I'm going to assume that William Shakespeare of Stratford on Avon is the person who wrote Hamlet, MacBeth, and all the rest of Shakespeare's plays. I will, however, throw up some links on the site to articles dealing with the "Authorship Question."

There are very few sources of information on the life of Shakespeare. No one has ever found any letters to his friends or manuscript copies of the plays Shakespeare wrote. We don't even have evidence that he owned any books. The main source of information about his life would be the legal and public records that have survived, things like death certificates, marriage licenses, suits, etc. Historians are also able to extrapolate information based on his plays and matching them up with events happening in the world. Frustratingly, even when the earliest biographers like Nicholas Rowe were putting together their works on Shakespeare, one of his daughters was still alive, but no one thought to interview her about her father.

So the first fact we know about William Shakespeare, born in Stratford on Avon, was that he was born about April 23, 1564. He was baptized at Holy Trinity Church on April 26, which would generally mean a birthday about 3 days beforehand. He wasn't born into a noble family, but he was firmly middle class, with a link on his mother's side to a wealthy family, the Arden's. His father was John Shakespeare, and he was a glover and leather merchant. His mother, Mary Arden, had brought money with her, but it had all been used by the time Shakespeare came of age. Shakespeare was the third of eight children in the family, though three died in childhood.

When Will was younger, his family was fairly well to do. His father was a merchant, alderman and bailiff. In fact, I've talked before about Queen Elizabeth's progress and working holiday at Kenilworth Castle in 1575 when Leicester tried so hard to woo her for the final time with fireworks, extravagant gardens, and pageants galore. It's possible that William would have attended at least part of these public festivities seeing as how his father would have possibly had a role to play as bailiff. Kenilworth is only about 14 miles from Stratford, so it's enticing to think about young Will watching the pageants and being introduced to the theater in that way.

William would have likely attended the local grammar school in Stratford, the King's School. But William never went to university, a fact that has fueled the debate about the authorship of his works. But he did have a solid education, as proven by his knowledge of Latin and Classical Greek, and his ability to distill information and churn it back out as plays.

John Shakespeare lost his luck in the late 1570's, and the family ran up debts. There has been some speculation about whether this is because of the tightening down on Catholics, and if they were secret recusants. It's possible that John was being fined for not attending the Protestant service, and there is in fact a piece of paper with his signature on it claiming to be a Catholic. It's a mysterious piece of paper that had been hidden away, and we don't really know much about why it was created - if it was a secret pact with the others, for example. Either way, there is a very strong possibility that the Shakespeare's had some recusant blood running through them, and it's possible that their luck began to run out in part due to the new laws around religion.

The next we hear about Shakespeare officially was his marriage to Anne Hathaway in November 1582. It was a rushed marriage, not following the normal protocol of reading the banns a specific number of times. She was pregnant as their daughter Susanna was born in

May 1583. Shakespeare was 18 when he married Anne, and she was 26. Much has been made of Shakespeare's marriage, and if he truly loved Anne. I'm certainly not an expert in this, but in the readings I have done, it appears that this was a rushed marriage thanks to Anne's pregnancy. The fact that William was able to spend so much time away from his wife and family in the future, living in London and only returning home occasionally, is telling to me. I just spent 6 weeks away from my husband when I had to go back to the US and he stayed in Spain. That was agony. Shakespeare was away for years at a time. It would appear that this wasn't a romantic marriage, and, when you think about what was expected of the time period, romance in a marriage wasn't really something you looked for. You did, however, look for a good match, and it seems that this was neither a romantic love, or much of a match for William, but in fact, he got Anne pregnant, and had to man up and deal with the consequences. Like I said before, I'm very interested in what Shakespeare tells us about love and marriage in Elizabethan England, but even more revealing, perhaps, is what he tells us about his particular marriage. Most Shakespeare marriages aren't particularly long and happy. Even the comedies that end with everyone getting married seem to do so with some pain involved. The shrew needs to be tamed, for example. There doesn't seem to be any love and affection on an equal level between partners. How much of that was to be expected from Elizabethan society, and how much was because Shakespeare was disappointed in his own marriage, we don't know of course, But it doesn't seem that he was particularly pleased with his match.

He did have two other children with Anne, twins, Judith and Hamnet. Hamnet died in childhood at the age of 11 in 1596. Shakespeare went back home then, and soon after wrote Hamlet, which is, of course, hauntingly similar to his son's name.

For the next seven years, Shakespeare disappears from all records before he shows up in London in 1592. At the beginning of this period he was 21 and married with three children in Stratford. At the end of the seven year period he was living in London as a resident playwright and part owner of a theater company. This period is known as the Lost Years and has led to many of the conspiracy theories. There are many possibilities to what he could have been doing. He could have had to run away because of issues with the law over poaching with Sir Thomas Lucy nearby (he had poached before as well).

The earliest and most common story of Shakespeare's life was written down around 1616 by a clergyman in Gloucestershire by the name of Richard Davies. According to Davies, Shakespeare was known to poach deer and rabbits on the property of local landowner Sir Thomas Lucy, "who oft had him whipped and sometimes imprisoned." Supposedly Shakespeare left Stratford to avoid punishment. It's thought that Shakespeare lampooned Lucy in a ballad, and there are those that believe Justice Shallow of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is based largely upon Shakespeare's supposed tormentor. Many scholars believe that the whole thing never happened, but the ballad, which was supposedly written in the mid 1580's reads:

A parliament member, a justice of peace,  
At home a poor scarecrow, at London an ass,  
If lousy is Lucy as some folks miscal it  
Then Lucy is lousy whatever befall it.

In the late 1600s another early biographer mentioned Shakespeare as a schoolmaster in rural England for at least part of those years. This story is considered more believable since it comes from the son of an actor who had been in Shakespeare's theater company. It also helps to explain how Shakespeare may have become more educated before arriving in London. But again, there is no documentary evidence.

In 1985, the scholar E. A. J. Honigmann wrote a new theory in his work *Shakespeare: The Lost Years*. While the evidence is purely circumstantial, he proposed that Shakespeare served a wealthy Catholic family in Lancashire, and that Shakespeare was likely a recusant Catholic himself, which may have led to his departure from Stratford. The theory hinges on the reference to a "William Shakeshafte" in the will of Alexander Houghton, in which there is also mention of costumes and musical instruments. Honigmann's premise remains a theory without any proof.

This period continues to be the subject of much speculation. Other popular stories have Shakespeare leaving Stratford with a troupe of actors, or working as a soldier, law clerk, butcher, glover, scrivener, or merchant. One story even puts a young Shakespeare in London, essentially voley parking horses - ie holding horses outside of theaters for patrons. Sadly, unless any new evidence shows up, we will probably never find out what happened to Shakespeare during those years.

Either way, by 1592 we have a record of him in London thanks to a taunt from Robert Greene, another playwright in London. He wrote, "...an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tiger's heart wrapped in a player's hide, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and being an absolute *Johannes fac totum*, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country." So it seems that Shakespeare was already making waves and seeing some success.

Between 1590 and 1592, Shakespeare's Henry VI series, Richard III, and The Comedy of Errors were performed. When the theaters were closed in 1593 because of the plague, he wrote two narrative poems, Venus and Adonis and The Rape of Lucrece, and probably began writing his sonnets. One hundred and fifty four of his sonnets have survived. By 1594, he had also written The Taming of the Shrew, The Two Gentlemen of Verona and Love's Labor's Lost.

One of the things that it's important to remember about Shakespeare is that he didn't particularly write original stories. Most of his most famous plays are based on stories that had been told throughout England and Europe for centuries. Even the very famous Hamlet had already likely

been done by Thomas Kyd. What made Shakespeare great wasn't so much his originality in coming up with plots, but his ability to fine tune them and tell them in a way that has survived through time and made them seem as applicable to contemporary times as they were then. He explores relationships in deeper ways than had been done before, he looked at these stories in new ways, exploring the relationships and power and jealousy and the whole gamut of human emotions in depth that had never been done. He also created over 1700 words that are commonly used today including words like laughable, lonely, barefaced, cold blooded, impede, luggage, and majestic. One of the links I put up in the show notes is to an extensive database of the words he invented, and it's totally worth checking out.

By 1594 Shakespeare was acting and writing for the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which was subsequently called the King's Men after James I came to the throne in 1603. The Lord Chamberlain's Men was one of many troupes that acted in London, and they became well known, becoming favorites of Elizabeth by the late 1590's. Shakespeare was not only an actor for them, but also a managing partner. He was a primary shareholder in the Globe Theater when it was built, for example. Two other famous Elizabethan theater personalities were part of the troupe - Will Kempe, a famous fool, and Richard Burbage, a tragic actor.

There is a famous story worth mentioning here about how The Globe came to be. The troupe had been acting at a venue called simply the Theater, north of the river. They had some issues with their landlord, and he was cancelling their lease. But they argued that the materials to build the Theater had belonged to the troupe. In the middle of a cold December night, the troupe brought with them builders and construction men who dismantled it and moved each piece to a warehouse while the owner was away celebrating Christmas outside London. It remains one of the most interesting stories about Shakespeare as we imagine him pulling this rather badass scheme. The pieces were stored through the winter, and then in the Spring the construction of the Globe began using the same materials as the old theater.

Shakespeare's theater company was the most successful in London in his day. He had plays published and sold as "penny-copies" to those in his audience who could read. Never before had a playwright enjoyed this kind of acclaim to see his works published and sold as popular literature while he was still alive. In addition, Shakespeare's ownership share in both the theatrical company and [the Globe](#) itself made him as much an entrepreneur as artist.

While Shakespeare might not be accounted wealthy by London standards, his success allowed him to purchase New House, the second largest house in Stratford, and retire in 1611.

Shakespeare [wrote his will in 1611](#), bequeathing his properties to his daughter Susanna (married in 1607 to Dr. John Hall). To his surviving daughter Judith, he left £300, and to his wife Anne left "my second best bed," which again has fueled the controversy about their marriage. Among the last plays that Shakespeare worked on was *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, which he wrote with a frequent collaborator, John Fletcher, around 1613. He died on April 23, 1616, supposedly on his birthday, and he was interred at Holy Trinity in Stratford on April 25. We also

do not know the cause of his death. His brother-in-law had died a week earlier, which could imply infectious disease, but Shakespeare's health may have had a longer decline.

In 1623, two working companions of Shakespeare from the Lord Chamberlain's Men, John Heminges and Henry Condell, printed the *First Folio* edition of his collected plays, of which half were previously unpublished.

Shakespeare's words have endured for 400 years, and still reach across the centuries as powerfully as ever. Even in death, he leaves a final piece of verse as his epitaph:

*Good friend, for Jesus' sake forbear  
To dig the dust enclosed here.  
Blessed be the man that spares these stones,  
And cursed be he that moves my bones.*

His bones haven't ever been moved.

Reflecting upon the achievement of his peer and sometimes rival, Ben Jonson wrote of Shakespeare, "He was not of an age, but for all time."

So now for the book recommendation which is *Will in the World, How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* by Stephen Greenblatt

I have a link on the site with the show notes. You can also get in touch on facebook at [facebook.com/englandcast](https://www.facebook.com/englandcast) or via twitter @teysko or by texting the listener feedback line at 801 6 TEYSKO. And please remember to buy my book, <http://www.sidewaysandbackwardsbook.com>.

Thanks for listening everyone - I'll be back in about 2 weeks with another interview with Tudor Times on their Person of the Month, and then I'm going to do one more episode on the theater with a look at some of the other playwrights of the time including Christopher Marlowe, Ben Johnson and the others. Then we'll be moving on to a couple of episodes on Rebellion - specifically some of the more famous rebellions that plagued our 16th century monarchs.