

In 1601, politics and danger entered Shakespeare's world. The events of that year seem to have touched him very deeply.

This is what happened: The Earl of Essex was one of Queen Elizabeth's great favorites. He was a dashing young nobleman who was fond of adventure and battle and was said to be the most popular man in England. But his life had taken strange turns, and that year he decided to mount a rebellion and overthrow the queen.

Essex's best friend was the Earl of Southampton, Shakespeare's old patron. He, too, was in on the plot.

Two days before the uprising was to take place, several of Essex's friends went to the Globe and offered forty shillings for a special performance of *Richard II* on the following day.

Richard II is one of Shakespeare's early plays. In it, an unfit king, Richard, is forced to give up his throne to a noble character, Bolingbroke, who then becomes Henry IV. Essex hoped that the crowds watching the play would think of him as a sort of Bolingbroke and be inspired to join him on the following day. To add to the effect, Essex's friends clapped and cheered at all the right moments, hoping to stir the crowd.

The next day, when Essex rode through the streets of London to raise the revolution, the people just closed their doors. Essex and his friends were arrested, and most of them were put to death. Southampton was allowed to live, but he was imprisoned in the Tower of London.

Queen Elizabeth knew about the special performance of *Richard II*, and understood the reason for it. "I am Richard II, know ye not that!" she was heard to say. The actors were questioned under oath but not punished. Forty shillings seemed to be a strong enough reason for a troupe to put on an old play by special request. The queen was willing to believe that they hadn't done it for political reasons.

During these years, a profound change seems to have come over Shakespeare, and we see it in the plays he wrote. Perhaps he was frightened by his close brush with danger. He must have been horrified to think that the dashing Essex was dead, and his friend shut up in the Tower. It was also during this period that Shakespeare's father died. Now, instead of happy, romantic comedies, he began to create his great tragedies: *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. In each of these stories, a great man is brought to destruction and death. His fall is caused partly by forces of evil and partly by some flaw in the hero. And both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* are about plots to murder kings.

Even his few comedies written in these years became darker, as if he had come to think badly of mankind.

In 1603, Queen Elizabeth died. The new king, James I, was a man who loved entertainment, and especially plays. His first week in London, he took over the patronage of Shakespeare's company. From then on, they were called the King's Men.

James I was also the king of Scotland. And for this Scottish king, Shakespeare turned to Scottish history to write *Macbeth*, one of his greatest plays. In it, he included many touches to please the king. There are witches and ghosts, bloody murders and mad scenes. But even with all the special effects, it is a dark and profound study of human nature.

Macbeth is a brave and loyal soldier until the witches tell him that he will someday be king. Ambition begins to burn in his heart, and he goes on to murder the king and everyone else who stands in the way of his goal. *Macbeth* is a chilling tale of a good man gone wrong, whose every step leads him closer and closer to his own destruction. It fascinated the playgoers of Shakespeare's time, and it fascinates us today.

When Shakespeare was about forty-seven, he left his busy life in London and retired to Stratford. There he lived the life of a country gentleman, in a grand house called New Place. This was a tranquil time.

Though his son Hamnet had died, his daughter Susanna had married and given him a granddaughter, Elizabeth. In a few years, the youngest daughter, Judith, also married. William and Anne seem to have lived together quietly, if not lovingly, after so many years apart.

From Stratford, he wrote his last few plays. There is a gentle quality about them, and a love of the countryside, which suggests that William Shakespeare had found peace in the village of his childhood.

On July 29, 1613, the first performance of his play *Henry VIII* took place at the Globe theater. In it, there is a scene where the king makes a grand entrance that is announced by firing a cannon. A spark accidentally set fire to the thatched roof, and within an hour, the famous Globe theater had burned to the ground. No one was hurt, but one man's pants caught on fire and had to be put out with the aid of a bottle of beer.

The King's Men hurriedly rescued props, costumes, and papers from the burning building. Fortunately for us, Shakespeare's plays were among the things they saved.

The theater was soon rebuilt, but William Shakespeare would not write any more plays for it. He lived the rest of his life quietly in the country.

Shakespeare's friends and admirers came to Stratford to see him. It was after a "merry meeting" with friends, including the playwright Ben Jonson, that he took sick with a fever.

In March 1614, he made his will. He left money to the poor of Stratford and to his friends. To his sister and his daughters, he gave his land, houses, and belongings. To his wife, Anne, he willed only his second-best bed! Historians have never quite known what to make of that.

He died on April 23, 1616. Though we do not know the exact date of his birth, it is quite possible that he died on his fifty-second birthday.

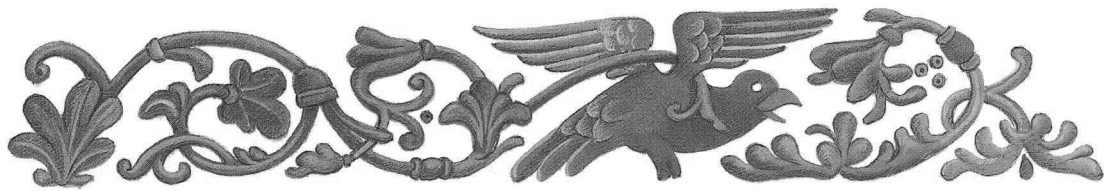
On the wall above his tomb is a sculpture of him, looking plump and middle-aged, writing with a quill pen. On the tomb are these lines:

Good frend for Jesus sake forbeare,
To digg the dust enclosed heare:
Blese be the man who spares thes stones,
And curst be he who moves my bones.

Over the years, there have been people who could not believe that the son of a glove maker, a small-town boy with only a grammar-school education, could have written the greatest series of plays in the English language. These doubters have suggested that some of the famous men of the day wrote them secretly and convinced Shakespeare to pretend to be the author. They suggest that the Earl of Oxford, Sir Francis Bacon, or even Queen Elizabeth herself wrote Shakespeare's plays.

Historians do not take these theories seriously. Those who knew and worked with Shakespeare during his lifetime never doubted that he had written these plays. No amount of education could have given him his high intelligence, amazing memory, artistic sensitivity, imagination, and profound understanding of the human heart. Just to know him was to realize the genius he was. "He was not for an age," wrote his friend Ben Jonson, "but for all time."

Seven years after Shakespeare's death, in 1623, the first book of his collected plays was published. The world has been reading and performing his plays ever since.



Postscript

Every author wants to make sure that all the facts in the book are correct and that all the words are spelled right. But when writing a book about Shakespeare, spelling is not a simple matter. The reason why makes an interesting story in itself.

In the year 1066, the Normans came over from France and conquered England. For over three hundred years, French was the court language, and English was spoken only by peasants. It wasn't until 1415 that the kings of England began speaking English again, and by then the language had greatly changed. The French spoken by the nobility had come to be more like English, and the English of the common people was full of French words.

People in those days rarely traveled. They spent their whole lives in the same village where their parents and grandparents had lived. And so each region developed its own way of speaking English. William Caxton wrote in 1490 about some sailors from London who were sailing down the Thames River. Fifty miles from London, they came ashore to buy food. They particularly wanted some eggs, which they called "eggys." The farmer's wife, who couldn't understand what they were asking for, assumed they were speaking French. In her village, eggs were "eyren."

Most people couldn't read or write, and those who could simply spelled words the way they pronounced them. If people who lived only fifty miles apart had trouble understanding one another, imagine how many different ways there were of saying—and spelling—even the most common words! There was no regular system of spelling or punctuation, and neither the people of England nor the printers of books seemed to think it was important how words were spelled. On the title page of the first English dictionary, *A Table Alphabeticall of Hard Words* by Robert Cawdrey, published in 1604, the word *words* was spelled two different



Bibliography

- *Brown, John Russell: *Shakespeare and His Theatre*. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books, 1982.
- Bryson, Bill: *The Mother Tongue: English and How It Got That Way*. New York: William Morrow, 1990.
- Fido, Martin: *Shakespeare*. New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1985.
- Folger Shakespeare Library, Volunteer Docents: *Shakespeare for the Young Reader: A Guide to Available Sources*. Washington: 1985.
- Fraser, Russell: *Young Shakespeare*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
- *Garfield, Leon: *Shakespeare Stories*. New York: Schocken Books, 1985.
- Greer, Germaine: *Shakespeare*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- *Haines, Charles: *William Shakespeare and His Plays*. New York: Franklin Watts, Inc., 1968.
- *Hodges, C. Walter: *Shakespeare's Theatre*. New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, Inc., 1964.
- McCrum, Robert, William Cran, and Robert MacNeil: *The Story of English*. New York: Viking, 1986.
- Rowse, A. L.: *Shakespeare the Man*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.
- Schoenbaum, S.: *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- : *Shakespeare: The Globe and the World*. New York: Folger Shakespeare Library and Oxford University Press, 1979.
- *Stewart, Philippa: *Shakespeare and His Theatre*. London: Wayland Publishers, 1973.
- *These books will be helpful to young readers interested in further research.