

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

LIFE (1564 - 1616)

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, in 1564. His father was a prosperous merchant so William attended the local grammar school. In November 1582, he married Anne Hathaway and the couple had three children.

By 1592 Shakespeare was known in London as an actor and a playwright. From 1594, he worked for the "Lord Chamberlain's Men", a company of actors in which Shakespeare was a shareholder. Later in 1603 the company came under the patronage of James I as the "King's Men". Unlike most actors and playwrights of his time, Shakespeare was comparatively wealthy. He was able to buy the largest available house in Stratford, where he retired in 1611 after about twenty years in London. He died in 1616.

ACHIEVEMENT

Shakespeare was the most complete and versatile literary talent of his day. His works dealt with issues that were of central importance in his day: social and political conflicts, family obstacles to true love, the pursuit and use of power, revenge, philosophic reflection, to name but a few, all of which are themes that have remained universal to this day and explain Shakespeare's continuing relevance. The general chronology of his plays falls into four periods:

- **Pre-1594:** Roman plays and medieval drama (*Richard III*, *The Comedy of Errors*);
- **1594-1600:** the lives of kings and royalty (*Henry V*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*);
- **1600-1608:** the great tragedies (*Macbeth*, *King Lear*);
- **Post-1608:** romantic tragicomedy or romances (*Cymbeline*, *The Tempest*).

Shakespeare was also the greatest poet of his day. He first came to notice for two long poems on classical subjects: *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. However, it is in the sequence of sonnets that he displayed his greatness as a non-dramatic poet, with individual **sonnets** that express an astonishing variety of feelings and thoughts about love, but also about friendship, mortality and immortality, life and art.

ROMEO AND JULIET

PLOT. The play is set in Verona, where two feuding noble families, the Montagues and the Capulets, live. Young Romeo Montague falls in love with Juliet, the daughter of the Capulets. The two lovers plan to be secretly married by Friar Laurence. But destiny is impeding: in a tragic fight with Juliet's cousin Tybalt, Romeo's best friend, Mercurio, is killed and Romeo slays Tybalt in turn. As a result, the Prince of Verona banishes the boy. Before leaving for Mantua, Romeo sleeps with Juliet for the first and last time and bids farewell to her. However, the family is pressing Juliet to marry Paris so that she takes a drug, prepared by Friar Laurence, that will make her seem dead for forty-two hours; meanwhile, the Friar will send a message to Romeo to tell him about the plan. Unfortunately, the letter from Friar Lawrence is delayed and Romeo believed that Juliet is dead. He goes to her tomb to commit a suicide at her side. There, he kills Paris, the drinks the poison he has bought. When Juliet awakens she sees him dead beside her, takes his dagger and kills herself. The two rival families will at last decide to put an end to their feud.

HAMLET

The story of Hamlet is a very old one: his name appears in an Iceland verse fragment of 1230, in the Latin *Historia Danica* and later in *Histoires Tragiques*, a collection of stories Shakespeare probably used. There also existed an early play about Hamlet, usually known as the *Ur-Hamlet*, a revenge tragedy.

PLOT. Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, returns from Wittenberg University to the Royal Castle of Elsinore in Denmark. He discovers that his father has recently died and that his mother Gertrude has married Claudius, his father's brother, who now rules the country. Hamlet is horrified by the revelation of his father's ghost that the king's death was not accidental and that the murderer is now king in his place. The ghost makes Hamlet swear that he will avenge the murder. For his own protection, and to conceal his plans, Hamlet pretends to be mad and rejects Ophelia, Polonius's daughter. In the meantime, a company of actors has arrived at the castle and Hamlet asks them to stage a murder scene, similar to his father's, in Claudius's presence. The king's behavior convinces Hamlet of his guilt. The king fears for his safety and sends Hamlet to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are given orders to kill him. Hamlet escape murder and returns to Denmark, where he learns that Ophelia has drowned herself.

Polonius's son, Laertes, and Claudius organize a fencing match in which Laertes will use a sword a tip dipped in poison. In addition Claudius prepares a cup of poisoned wine. When Laertes wounds Hamlet, the latter realizes the treachery and stabs Laertes. Before dying Laertes reveal that Claudius is the villain: Hamlet stabs him and forces him to drink the poisoned wine. Then he dies and Fortinbras, a Norwegian prince, becomes the new king of Denmark.

SONNETS

A collection of sonnets by Shakespeare was published in 1609: it includes 154 sonnets developing around three main characters:

- **the poet**, a first person speaking;
- **a young man** he admires;
- **a dark lady** loved by the poet, but also involved in an affair with the young man.

The first 126 sonnets are written to praise the young man and invite him to procreate, the last 28 sonnets, instead, are focused on the poet's desire for the dark lady.