

LECTURE 4. William Shakespeare. The life of Shakespeare and different periods in his creative activity. The Sonnets. Philosophical problems in the sonnets and Shakespeare's humanism. Shakespeare's histories.

Plan

The life of Shakespeare and different periods in his creative activity.

The Sonnets. Philosophical problems in the sonnets

Shakespeare's humanism. Shakespeare's histories

1564-1616 For someone who lived almost 400 years ago, a surprising amount is known about Shakespeare's life. Indeed we know more about his life than about almost any other writer of his age. Nonetheless, for the life of the greatest writer in the English language, there are still significant gaps, and therefore much supposition surrounds the facts we have. He composed his plays during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, who ruled England from 1558 to 1603, and during the early part of the reign of her cousin James VI of Scotland, who took England's throne as James I after Elizabeth's death in 1603. During this period England saw an outpouring of poetry and drama, led by Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, and Christopher Marlowe, that remains unsurpassed in English literary history.

EARLY YEARS

Although the exact date of Shakespeare's birth is unknown, his baptism on April 26, 1564, was recorded in the parish register of Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, a prosperous town in the English Midlands. Based on this record and on the fact that children in Shakespeare's time were usually baptized two or three days after birth, April 23 has traditionally been accepted as his date of birth. The third of eight children, William Shakespeare was the eldest son of John Shakespeare, a locally prominent glovemaker and wool merchant, and Mary Arden, the daughter of a well-to-do landowner in the nearby village of Wilmcote. The young Shakespeare probably attended the Stratford grammar school, the King's New School, which educated the sons of Stratford citizens. The school's rigorous curriculum was based largely on the study of Latin and the major classical writers. Shakespeare's writings show that he was well acquainted with the Latin poet Ovid as well as other Latin works, including comedies by Terence and Plautus, two much-admired Roman playwrights.

As his family's eldest son, Shakespeare ordinarily would have been apprenticed to his father's shop after he completed grammar school, so that he could learn and eventually take over the business. We do not have any evidence that he did so, however.

According to one late 17th-century account, he was apprenticed instead to a butcher because of declines in his father's financial situation, but this claim is no more convincing than a number of other claims. A potentially reliable source, William Beeston, the son of an actor and theater manager who would certainly have known Shakespeare, claimed that Shakespeare had been "a schoolmaster in the country." Recently, some scholars have been intrigued by a letter from 1581 from a prominent landowner, Alexander Hoghton, recommending a William Shakeshafte to Sir Thomas Hesketh. Some believe that Shakeshafte is Shakespeare, working perhaps as a schoolmaster for the Hoghtons, a Catholic family in Lancashire. However, no absolutely reliable historical records remain to provide information about Shakespeare's life between his baptism and his marriage. On November 27, 1582, a license was issued to permit Shakespeare's marriage, at the age of 18, to Anne Hathaway, aged 26 and the daughter of a Warwickshire farmer. (Although the document lists the bride as "Annam Whateley" the scribe most likely made an error in the entry.)

The next day a bond was signed to protect the bishop who issued the license from any legal responsibility for approving the marriage, as William was still a minor and Anne was pregnant. The couple's daughter, Susanna, was born on May 26, 1583, and twins — Hamnet and Judith who were named for their godparents, neighbors Hamnet and Judith Sadler—followed on February 2, 1585. Sometime after the birth of the twins, Shakespeare apparently left Stratford, but no records have turned up to reveal his activity between their birth and his presence in London in 1592, when he was already at work in the theater. For this reason Shakespeare's biographers sometimes refer to the years between 1585 and 1592 as "the lost years." Speculations about this period abound. An unsubstantiated report claims Shakespeare left Stratford after he was caught poaching in the deer park of Sir Thomas Lucy, a local justice of the peace. Another theory has him leaving for London with a theater troupe that had performed in Stratford in 1587.

ARRIVAL IN LONDON

Shakespeare seems to have arrived in London about 1588, and by 1592 he had attained sufficient success as an actor and a playwright to attract the venom of an anxious rival. In his *Groat's Worth of Wit*, English dramatist Robert Greene sneers at "an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers, that 20 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 factotum [jack of all trades], is in his own conceit the only Shakescene in a country." The pun on Shakespeare's name and the

parody in the quotation of a line from Henry VI leave no doubt of Greene's target. Shortly after this remark, Shakespeare's first publications appeared.

His poetry rather than his plays reached print first: *Venus and Adonis* in 1593 and *The Rape of Lucrece* in 1594. These two fashionably erotic narrative poems were probably written to earn money as the theaters were closed from the summer of 1592 to the spring of 1594 because of plague, and Shakespeare's normal source of income was thus denied him. Even so, the two poems, along with the *Sonnets*, established Shakespeare's reputation as a gifted and popular poet. Shakespeare dedicated the two poems to Henry Wriothesley, 3rd earl of Southampton. Scholars disagree on whether the dedications are evidence of a close relationship between Shakespeare and Southampton. Literary dedications were designed to gain financial support from wealthy men interested in fostering the arts, and it is probable that Southampton rewarded Shakespeare for his two poems.

Both poems became best-sellers—*The Rape of Lucrece* appearing in eight editions by 1632, *Venus and Adonis* in a remarkable 16 editions by 1636—and both were widely quoted and often imitated. The *Sonnets* were not published until 1609, but as early as 1598, a contemporary, Francis Meres, praised Shakespeare as a “mellifluous and honey-tongued” poet equal to the Roman Ovid, praising in particular his “sugared sonnets” that were circulating “among his private friends.” The 154 sonnets describe the devotion of a character, often identified as the poet himself, to a young man whose beauty and virtue he praises and to a mysterious and faithless dark lady with whom the poet is infatuated. The sonnets are prized for their exploration of love in all its aspects. Sonnet 18, which begins “Shall I compare thee to a summer's day,” ranks among the most famous love poems of all time.

ACTOR AND PLAYWRIGHT

Shakespeare's reputation today is, however, based primarily on the 38 plays that he wrote, modified, or collaborated on. Records of Shakespeare's plays begin to appear in 1594, when the theaters reopened with the passing of the plague that had closed them for 21 months. In December of 1594 his play *The Comedy of Errors* was performed in London during the Christmas revels at Gray's Inn, one of the London law schools. In March of the following year he received payment for two plays that had been performed during the 21 Christmas holidays at the court of Queen Elizabeth I by his theatrical company, known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men. The receipt for payment, which he signed along with two fellow actors, reveals that he had by this time achieved a prominent place in the company. He was already probably a so-called sharer, a position entitling him to a percentage of the company's profits rather than merely a salary as an

actor and a playwright. In time the profits of this company and its two theaters, the Globe Theatre, which opened in 1599, and the Blackfriars, which the company took over in 1608, enabled Shakespeare to become a wealthy man. It is worth noting that Shakespeare's share in the acting company made him wealthy, not any commissions or royalties from writing his plays.

Playwriting was generally poorly paid work, which involved providing scripts for the successful theater business. His plays would have belonged to the acting company, and when they did reach print they then belonged to the publisher. No system of royalties existed at that time. Indeed, with the exception of the two narrative poems he published in 1593 and 1594, Shakespeare never seems to have bothered about publication. The plays that reached print did so without his involvement. The only form of "publication" he sought was their performance in the theater. Music of the Renaissance Theater During the Renaissance (15th-16th century) a "rebirth" of artists and intellectuals paralleled a movement to restore the philosophical and artistic ideals of classical antiquity. The spirit of this time is often reflected in its secular songs and consort music. This was also a time when music became more of a part of artistic and literary life. The English playwright William Shakespeare utilized music in the form of popular songs and well-known ballads in his plays. Not surprisingly, his verses inspired numerous composers of songs and dramatic orchestral music. The theater served Shakespeare's financial needs well. In 1597 he bought New Place, a substantial three-story house in Stratford. With the opening of the splendid Globe Theatre in 1599, Shakespeare's fortunes increased and in 1602 he bought additional property: 43 hectares (107 acres) of arable land and 8 hectares (20 acres) of pasture north of the town of Stratford and, later that year, a cottage facing the garden at New Place. In 1605 he bought more property in a neighboring village. His financial activities can be traced, and his final investment is the purchase of a house in the Blackfriars district of London in 1613. Shakespeare wrote nearly all of his plays from 1590 to 1611, when he retired to New Place. A series of history plays and joyful comedies appeared throughout the 1590s, ending with *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*. At the same time as he was writing comedy, he also wrote nine history plays, treating the reigns of England's medieval kings and exploring realities of power still relevant today. The great tragedies—including *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*—were written during the first decade of the 1600s. All focus on a basically decent individual who brings about his own downfall through a tragic flaw. Scholars have theorized about the reasons behind this change in Shakespeare's vision, and the switch from a focus on social aspects of human activity to the rending experience of the individual. But no one knows

whether events in his own life or changes in England's circumstances triggered the shift, or whether it was just an aesthetic decision. Shakespeare's only son, Hamnet, had died in 1596 at the age of 11, his father died in 1601, and England's popular monarch, Elizabeth I, died in 1603, so it is not unreasonable to think that the change in Shakespeare's genre and tone reflects some change in his own view of life prompted by these events. In his last years working as a playwright, however, Shakespeare wrote a number of plays that are often called romances or tragicomedies, plays in which the tragic facts of human existence are fully acknowledged but where reassuring patterns of reconciliation and harmony can be seen finally to shape the action. Shakespeare's plays were performed at the courts of Queen Elizabeth I and King James I more frequently than those of any other dramatist of that time. Shakespeare risked losing royal favor only once, in 1599, when his company performed "the play of the deposing and killing of King Richard II" at the request of a group of conspirators against Elizabeth. In the subsequent inquiry, Shakespeare's company was absolved of any knowing participation in the conspiracy. Although Shakespeare's plays enjoyed great popularity with the public, most people did not consider them literature. Plays were merely popular entertainments, not unlike the movies today.

LAST YEARS

Shakespeare's Burial Site England's greatest playwright, William Shakespeare, died on April 23, 1616, and was buried in the Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, shown here. His epitaph reads: Good friend for Jesus sake forbear To digg the dust enclosed here: Blese be ye man yt spares thes stones And curst be he yt moves my bones. Chris Cole/The Image Bank After about 1608 Shakespeare began to write fewer plays. For most of his working life he wrote at least two plays a year; by 1608 he had slowed usually to one a year, even though the acting company continued to enjoy great success. In 1608 the King's Men, as his company was called after King James took the throne, began to perform at Blackfriars, an indoor theater that charged higher prices and drew a more sophisticated audience than the outdoor Globe. An indoor theater presented possibilities in staging and scenery that the Globe did not permit, and these can be recognized in the late plays. In 1613 fire destroyed the Globe Theatre during a performance of Henry VIII.

Although the Globe was quickly rebuilt, Shakespeare's association with it—and probably with the company—had ended. Around the time of the fire, Shakespeare retired to Stratford, where he had established his family and become a prominent citizen. Shakespeare's daughter Susanna had married John Hall, a doctor with a thriving practice in Stratford, in 1607. His younger daughter, Judith, married a Stratford

winemaker, Thomas Quiney, in 1616. Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616—the month and day traditionally assigned to his birth—and was buried in Stratford’s Holy Trinity Church. He had made his will the previous month, “in perfect health and memory.” The cause of his death is not known, though a report from the Holy Trinity’s vicar in the 1660s claims that he “died of a fever . . . contracted after a night of drinking with Ben Jonson and Michael Drayton, friends and fellow writers.” Shakespeare left the bulk of his estate to his daughter Susanna and the sum of 300 pounds to his daughter Judith. The only specific provision for his wife was their “second-best bed with the furniture [linens],” although customary practice allowed a widow one-third of the estate. Shakespeare also left money for “the poor of Stratford,” and remembered the three surviving original members of his acting company, Richard Burbage, John Heminges, and Henry Condell, with small grants to buy memorial rings.

Shakespeare’s wife, Anne, died on August 6, 1623. She lived long enough to see a monument to her husband erected in Holy Trinity Church, but she died just before the publication of the First Folio of Shakespeare’s plays, the more lasting monument to his memory. Soon after her death, Susanna and John Hall moved into New Place, where they lived until their deaths, his in 1635 and hers in 1649. Their daughter, Elizabeth Hall, died childless in 1670. Judith Quiney had three sons, but none lived long enough to produce heirs, and she died in 1662. Thus, by 1670, the line of Shakespeare’s descendants had reached its end.

THE WORKS OF SHAKESPEARE

So far as is known, Shakespeare had no hand in the publication of any of his plays and indeed no interest in the publication. Performance was the only public forum he sought for his plays. He supplied the scripts to the Chamberlain’s Men and the King’s Men, but acting companies of that time often thought it bad business to allow their popular plays to be printed as it might give other companies access to their property. Some plays, however, did reach print. Eighteen were published in small, cheap quarto editions, though often in unreliable texts. A quarto resembled a pamphlet, its pages formed by folding pieces of paper in half twice. For none of these editions did Shakespeare receive money. In the absence of anything like modern copyright law, which recognizes an author’s legal right to his or her creation, 16th- and 17th-century publishers paid for a manuscript, with no need to enquire about who wrote it, and then were able to publish it and establish their ownership of the copy.

Fortunately for posterity, two fellow actors and friends of Shakespeare—Heminges and Condell—collected 36 of his plays, 18 of them never before printed, and

published them in a handsome folio edition, a large book with individual pages formed by folding sheets of paper once. This edition, known as the First Folio, appeared in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death. The First Folio divided Shakespeare's plays into three categories: comedies, histories, and tragedies. These categories are used in this article, with the addition of a fourth category: tragicomedies, a term that modern critics have often used for the late plays, which do not neatly fit into any of the three folio categories.

References

Михальская Н.П. История английской литературы. М., «Академия», 2007

Drabble M., Stringer J. Oxford Concise Companion to English Literature.

Carter R., MacRae J., The Penguin Guide to English Literature: Britain and Ireland.

Oxford Illustrated Guide to English Literature.

Internet resources

<http://www.online-literature.com/chaucer/canterbury/>

<Http://englishlit.about.com/arts/englishlit> www.spartacus.schoonet.co.uk/drama.htm

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>