

## GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH SHAKESPEARE

If you could take the ultimate field trip and visit Stratford-on-Avon, Shakespeare's birthplace, you could still find buildings and scenes that were familiar to him. Still standing are the house where he was born; the grammar school he attended; the nearby farmhouse home of Anne Hathaway, his wife; and the fine house and garden of Dr. John Hall, his son-in-law. Perhaps, like other visitors, you'd eat your bag lunch in Dr. Hall's garden, surrounded by flowers that Shakespeare knew and loved. Of course, not all of Stratford is old and quaint; much of it is geared to the thousands of tourists who come each year to see William Shakespeare's birthplace.

But let's try to imagine it as it was in Shakespeare's boyhood, a sixteenth-century English village surrounded by forests where deer wandered freely. Its meadows were dotted with wild flowers, and stately swans sailed along the River Avon. (They still do!) Like the other village lads, Shakespeare wandered through the woods and fields, acquiring early his love and knowledge of nature. That the beauty of the English countryside made a lasting impression on him is shown by his references in the plays to animals, birds, and flowers.

He was born in Stratford, probably on April 23, 1564, and christened on April 26. His father, John Shakespeare, was a prosperous glovemaker. He was respected by his neighbors and held various town offices. His mother, Mary Arden, was from a good family and some fortune, having inherited considerable farm property.

As a young boy, William attended grammar school, where emphasis was on Latin grammar and not much else. Later, in London, he would learn French. For his plays, his reference books would be Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (for mythology), Plutarch's *Lives* (for his Roman history plays), and Holinshed's *Chronicles* (for his English history plays). But in Stratford, he learned Latin grammar! In his boyhood, traveling players came to Stratford (as they did to Elsinore in *Hamlet*), and his introduction to drama came that way.

By the time he was eighteen, his formal education was long past. He had already assumed a man's responsibilities, marrying in November 1582 Anne

Hathaway, a woman eight years his senior. In May 1583, the first child, Susanna, was born. Two years later, Anne gave birth to twins, Hamnet and Judith, christened in February, 1585.

Within a year or two, Shakespeare had departed for London to earn fame and fortune, leaving Anne and the family behind. It was not unusual for an actor to have his family with him, even on tours. The fact that Anne did not join her husband in London seems to indicate that she was a Puritan. Puritans believed that the stage and its actors did much to corrupt people's morals. Actually, a few years later, Puritanism became so strong in London that the theaters were ordered closed. But when Shakespeare arrived there, playgoing was still a popular entertainment, enjoyed and sponsored by Queen Elizabeth herself.

By 1592, Shakespeare was an established actor in London, and he remained an actor throughout his career. His financial success came from his share of the gate (admissions), not from the sale of his plays which probably netted him only a few pounds each.

His early literary successes were with his narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, both dedicated to his wealthy patron, the young Earl of Southampton. In 1594, the theaters reopened after a temporary closing during a plague epidemic. From that time, Shakespeare concentrated his literary efforts on plays, producing thirty-seven by the time of his retirement in 1610.

Throughout his career, he was a member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later, the King's Men), whose leading actor was Richard Burbage. Shakespeare lived quietly and gained a reputation as a polite, good-natured man and loyal friend. Investing his money wisely, he acquired much property in Stratford, including New Place, to which he eventually retired.

He died there on April 23, 1616. His only son having predeceased him, Shakespeare tried to leave his property intact for a male heir. However, neither daughter produced one. His greatest legacy, the plays, came down to us through the efforts of two actor friends who collected and published them after his death.

## LESSON I: OUTLINING "GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH SHAKESPEARE" FOR READY REFERENCE

1. When and where was Shakespeare born? \_\_\_\_\_
2. A. What was his father's name and occupation? \_\_\_\_\_  
B. What was his mother's name? \_\_\_\_\_
3. How much formal education did Shakespeare have? \_\_\_\_\_
4. What lasting effect did Stratford and the surrounding countryside have on him? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. Whom and when did he marry? \_\_\_\_\_
6. What were his children's names? \_\_\_\_\_
7. Approximately when did he leave Stratford for London? \_\_\_\_\_
8. Why didn't his wife go with him? \_\_\_\_\_
9. How did Shakespeare become well-to-do? \_\_\_\_\_
10. What were his earliest literary successes? \_\_\_\_\_
11. What reference books did he use to write his plays? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
12. How many plays did he write? \_\_\_\_\_
13. What was the name of the acting company of which he was a part? \_\_\_\_\_
14. What was his reputation in London? \_\_\_\_\_
15. When did Shakespeare retire and where did he go? \_\_\_\_\_
16. When did he die? \_\_\_\_\_
17. What was the eventual effect of Puritanism on the theaters? \_\_\_\_\_