

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

An introduction by Robert Anderson

William Shakespeare's Life

He was not of an age, but for all time.

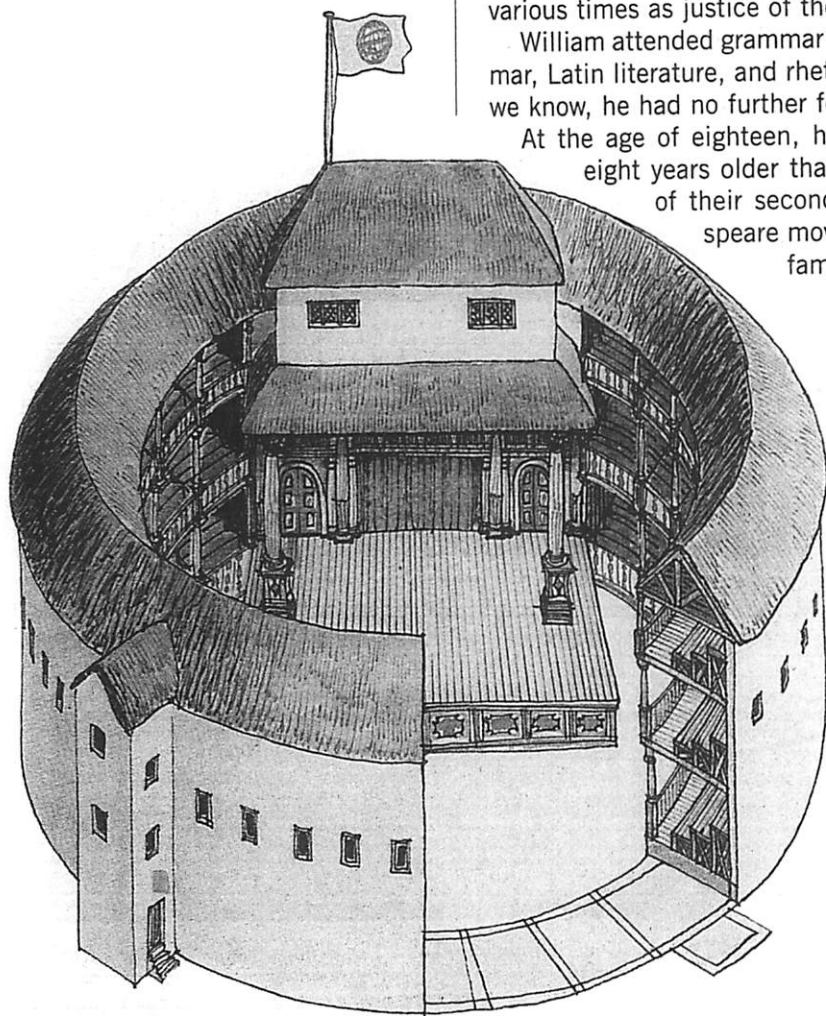
—Ben Jonson

Little is known about the life of William Shakespeare. What is known is mostly derived from church and legal documents—a baptismal registration, a marriage license, and records of real-estate transactions. We also have a few remarks that others wrote about him during his lifetime.

We know that William was born the third of eight children, around April 23, 1564, in Stratford, a market town about one hundred miles northwest of London. His father, John, was a shopkeeper and a man of considerable standing in Stratford, serving at various times as justice of the peace and high bailiff (mayor).

William attended grammar school, where he studied Latin grammar, Latin literature, and rhetoric (the uses of language). As far as we know, he had no further formal education.

At the age of eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway, who was eight years older than he was. Some time after the birth of their second and third children (twins), Shakespeare moved to London, apparently leaving his family to remain in Stratford.



(Left) "The Wooden O," the Globe Theater.

Drawing by David Gentleman.

(Opposite left) Glenn Close as Gertrude, Queen of Denmark, in *Hamlet*, a film directed by Franco Zeffirelli. (Opposite right) A poster showing Denzel Washington as Shakespeare's *Richard III*.

Poster © 1990 by Paul Davis. Courtesy of the artist.

SHAKES

We know that several years later, by 1592, Shakespeare had already become an actor and a playwright. By 1594, he was a charter member of the theatrical company called the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which was later to become the King's Men. (As the names of these acting companies indicate, theatrical groups depended on the support of a wealthy patron—the King's Men were supported by King James himself.) Shakespeare worked with this company for the rest of his writing life. Year after year, he provided it with plays, almost on demand. Shakespeare was the ultimate professional writer. He had a theater that needed plays, actors who needed parts, and a family that needed to be fed.

Romeo and Juliet was probably among the early plays that Shakespeare wrote between 1594 and 1596. By 1612, when he had returned to Stratford to live the life of a prosperous retired gentleman, Shakespeare had written thirty-seven plays, including such masterpieces as *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*.

Shakespeare's plays are still produced all over the world. During a recent Broadway season, one critic estimated that if Shakespeare were alive today, he would be receiving \$25,000 a week in royalties for a production of *Othello* alone. The play was attracting larger audiences than any other nonmusical production in town.

Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616, at the age of fifty-two. He is buried under the old stone floor in the chancel of the church in Stratford. Carved over his grave is the following verse:


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.

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JOSEPH PAPP PRESENTS

RICHARD III

AUGUST 3 - SEPTEMBER 2, 1990

DELAWARE THEATRE CENTRAL PARK



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Shakespeare's Theater and the Modern Stage



An afternoon audience flocking to the Globe Theater. Drawn around 1600.

596 William Shakespeare

These are hardly the best of Shakespeare's lines (if indeed they are his at all), but like his other lines, they seem to have worked. His bones lie undisturbed to this day.

Sometimes playwrights influence the shape and form of a theater, but more often, existing theaters seem to influence the shape and form of plays. It is important that we understand Shakespeare's theater because it influenced the way he wrote his plays.

The "Wooden O"

In 1576, outside the city walls of London, an actor-manager named James Burbage built the first permanent theater in England. He called it The Theater. Up to that time, touring acting companies had played wherever they could rent space. Usually this would be in the courtyards of inns. There the actors would erect a temporary platform stage at one end of the yard and play to an audience which stood around the stage or sat in the tiers of balconies that surrounded the courtyard. (Normally, these balconies were used as passageways to the various rooms of the inn.)

It was natural, then, that the first theater built by Burbage should derive its shape and form from the inns.

In 1599, Burbage's theater was taken down and its timbers were used by Shakespeare and his company to build the Globe Theater. This was the theater for which Shakespeare wrote most of his plays.

In his play *Henry V*, Shakespeare called his theater a "wooden O." It was a large, round (or polygonal) building, three stories high, with a large platform stage that projected from one end into a yard open to the sky. In the back wall of this stage was a curtained-off inner stage. Flanking the inner stage were two doors for entrances and exits. Above this inner stage was a small balcony or upper stage, which could be used to suggest Juliet's balcony or the high walls of a castle or the bridge of a ship. Trap doors were placed in the floor of the main stage for the entrances and exits of ghosts and for descents into hell.

The plays were performed in the afternoon. Since the stage was open to the sky, there was no need for stage illumination. There were very few sets (scenery, furniture, etc.). The stage was "set" by the language. A whole forest scene is created in one play when a character announces: "Well, this is the Forest of Arden." But costumes were often elaborate, and the stage might be hung with colorful banners and trappings. (The groundlings, those eight hundred or so people who stood around the stage for the price of a penny, loved a good show. Most people still do.)

We can see that this stage, with its few sets and many acting areas—forestage, inner stage, and upper stage—made for a theater

of great fluidity. That is, scene could follow scene with almost cinematic ease.

In one interesting aspect, the theater in Shakespeare's day was very different from the theater we know today. Acting wasn't considered entirely respectable by the English Puritans, so all women's parts were played by boys. Not for many years did women appear on stage in the professional English theater. In Shakespeare's day, Juliet would have been played by a trained boy actor.

The Modern Stage

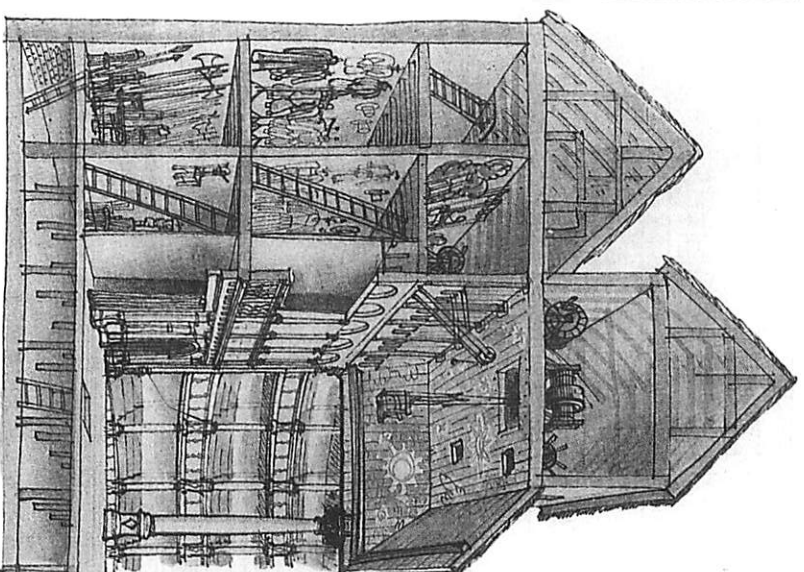
It has been said that all you need for a theater is "two planks and a passion." Since Shakespeare's time, "the planks" (the stage) have undergone various changes. First, the part of the stage which projected into the yard grew narrower, and the small curtained inner stage grew larger, until there developed what is called the **proscenium stage**. Here, there is no outer stage; there is only the inner stage, and a large curtain separates it from the audience. The effect is like looking inside a window or inside a picture frame. This is the stage most of us know today. It has been standard for well over a hundred years.

But recently, we have seen a reversal of this design. Now, more and more theaters (especially university and regional theaters) are building "thrust" stages, or arena stages. In this kind of theater, the audience once again sits on three or even four sides of the stage.

Like Shakespeare's stage, this kind of "thrust" stage, with its minimal scenery, allows playwrights (if they want) to move their stories rapidly from place to place. They can establish each new scene with a line like "Well, this is the Forest of Arden." Consequently, there has been a temptation to write plays that imitate the style of movies. But this imitation rarely works. Theater and movies are two different media. A theater audience does not necessarily want to be whisked from place to place. People who go to plays often prefer to spend a long, long time watching the subtle development of conflicts among a small group of people, all in one setting. For example, all of the action in Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* takes place inside one small apartment on Chicago's South Side.

Movies are basically a *visual* medium and so must chiefly engage and delight the eye, rather than the ear. (One movie director once referred to a dialogue in a movie as "foreground noise"!) The theater is much more a medium of *words*. When we go to see a play, it is the movement of the *words* rather than the movement of the scenery that delights us.

This difference between the appeal of a movie and the appeal of a play may account for the failure of some successful plays when they are translated to the screen. The movie producer will say, "Open up the story." In "opening up the story," the producer sometimes loses the concentration, the intensity, which was the prime virtue of the play.



A cutaway of the Globe, showing the three stage levels and the dressing and prop rooms.

Drawing by David Gentleman.

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Romeo and Juliet

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When the great stage designer Jo Mielziner was planning the Vivian Beaumont Theater in the Lincoln Center Complex in New York City, he invited a number of playwrights to come to his studio and view the model for the stage. What we saw was an immense, wide open space. It seemed impossible that such a stage could ever accommodate so many of the American “classics”—*The Glass Menagerie*, *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, *Life with Father*—which call for confined, intimate, interior settings. But Mielziner said, “We’re going to stretch you all.”

Unfortunately, we did not stretch. That theater and that stage did not inspire us as Shakespeare’s stage had inspired him. After struggling through several seasons, the Beaumont Theater was closed to be redesigned.

Most of Shakespeare’s plays are based on stories that were already well known to his audiences. (He never wrote a play about a contemporary subject.) *Romeo and Juliet* is taken from a long narrative poem by Arthur Brooke, which was published in 1562 as *The Tragicall Historie of Romeus and Juliet*. Brooke’s popular poem itself was based on even older Italian stories.

Romeo and Juliet, a very young man and a nearly fourteen-year-old girl, fall in love at first sight. They are caught up in an idealized, almost unreal, passionate love. They are in love with love. In his Prologue, Brooke preaches a moral, which people of his time expected. He says that Romeo and Juliet had to die because they broke laws and married unwisely, against their parents’ wishes. But Shakespeare does away with this moralizing. He presents the couple as “star-crossed lovers,” doomed to disaster by Fate.

To understand what “star-crossed” means, you have to realize that most people of Shakespeare’s time believed in astrology. They believed that the course of their lives was partly determined by the hour, day, month, and year of their birth—hence, “the star” under which they were born. But Shakespeare may not have shared this belief. In a later play, *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare has a character question this old idea about astrology and the influence of the stars:

The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves that we are underlings.

Although Shakespeare says in the Prologue that Romeo and Juliet are “star-crossed,” he does not make them mere victims of Fate. Romeo and Juliet make decisions that lead to their disaster. More important, other characters have a hand in their disaster—they too make decisions that lead to the play’s tragic ending.

The Characters

The roster of colorful characters in Shakespeare's plays is extraordinary. In *Romeo and Juliet* we have two of the most notable, Mercutio and the Nurse. Some critics have even suggested that Shakespeare had to kill off Mercutio because he was so attractive he might take over the story. Mercutio is a favorite part with actors, as is the Nurse. She is vividly painted in very few colors, but she is unforgettable.

The lesser characters are not so remarkable, but each is an individual as well as the representative of a type. We can say of many of them, "Oh, yes. I know somebody like that." Tybalt is like all raging bullies. Lord Capulet is like many fussy, loving, but domineering fathers. Benvolio is a typical best friend.

Of the two main characters, Romeo tends to be the less interesting. He is from start to finish an impetuous youth in love. Though it is said that all the world loves a lover, somehow acting a person doing nothing but loving is not very fascinating. Even the greatest actor of our time, Laurence Olivier, did not come off well when he played Romeo. And yet, if Romeo were not this one-note, passionate character, we might not have had a play. Plays tend to be driven by characters who are in some way driven themselves.

Juliet, on the other hand, is a prized part. Actresses find it rewarding to develop the character of Juliet, as she grows from a carefree girl to a mature and deeply committed woman.

The Poetry

Whatever Shakespeare learned of rhetoric, or language, in grammar school, he parades with relish in *Romeo and Juliet*. He is obviously having a fine time here with puns and wordplay and all the other variations he can ring on the English language.

Romeo and Juliet is written in both prose and poetry. Prose is for the most part spoken by the common people and occasionally by Mercutio when he is joking. Most of the other characters speak in poetry.

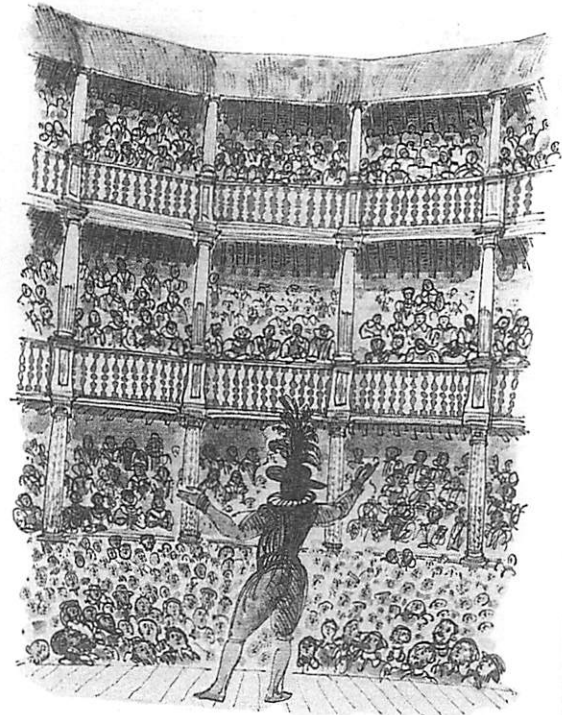
Blank Verse. The poetry is largely written in unrhymed iambic pentameter, which is called **blank verse**. The word *blank* just means that there is no rhyme.

A line is written in what is called **iambic meter** when an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable, as in the word *pre-fer*.

Iambic pentameter simply means that there are five of these iambic units in each line. Here is a perfect example of a line in iambic pentameter, spoken by Romeo:

Bŭt sŏft! Wĥat light thrŏugh yŏndĕr wĭndŏw brĕaks?

Now, obviously, a whole play written in this strict meter would become monotonous and singsong. Shakespeare, therefore, sometimes varies the rhythm to give variety, and sometimes emphasis. In the same speech of Romeo's we find these lines:



The actors at the Globe stood in the middle of thousands of spectators.

Drawing by David Gentleman.

“Some critics have even suggested that Shakespeare had to kill off Mercutio because he was so attractive he might take over the story. Mercutio is a favorite part with actors, as is the Nurse.”

Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven
Having some business, do entreat her eyes
To twinkle in their spheres till they return.

We see that here in the first two lines Shakespeare reverses the usual pattern and stresses the first instead of the second syllable. Also, at the end of the first line, he has left an extra unstressed syllable. But notice that still, with all the variations, he has kept *five strong beats* to each line.

Couplets. When Shakespeare uses rhymes, he generally uses **couplets**, two consecutive lines of poetry that rhyme. The couplets often punctuate a character's exit or signal the end of a scene. Here, in the end of Act II, Scene 2, Juliet exits from the balcony with this couplet:

Good night, good night! Parting is such sweet sorrow
That I shall say good night till it be morrow.

A moment later, Romeo ends the scene with another couplet:

Hence will I to my ghostly friar's close cell,
His help to crave and my dear hap to tell.

Reading the Lines. We have all heard people ruin a poem by mechanically pausing at the end of each line, regardless of whether or not the meaning of the line called for such a pause. (Maxwell Anderson, who wrote verse plays in the 1930's and 1940's, had his plays typed as though they were prose, so that the actors would not be tempted to pause at the end of each line.)

Lines of poetry are either end-stopped lines or run-on lines. An **end-stopped line** has some punctuation at its end. A **run-on line** has no punctuation at its end. In a run-on line, the meaning is completed in the line or lines that follow.

In Act II, Scene 2, Juliet speaks in end-stopped lines—lines that end with punctuation marks which require her to pause:

O, Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father and refuse thy name;
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
And I'll no longer be a Capulet.

But Romeo's speech from the same scene consists entirely of run-on lines. The only pause Romeo makes is in the middle of his second line, after the word "lamp."

The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars
As daylight doth a lamp; her eyes in heaven
Would through the airy region stream so bright
That birds would sing and think it were not night.

In the end, the glory of *Romeo and Juliet* is the beauty of the poetry, its imagery, its music, its theatricality. The whole play is brisk and fast moving, and the poetry suits the story of young people dealing with a matter very important to them—passionate, once-in-a-lifetime love.

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The Themes

ROMEO and JULIET

Romeo and Juliet takes place in a universe where (as one critic says) God in His providence is aware of even the fall of a sparrow. In this universe, people believe that what must be, must be, and the heroic people meet their destiny with courage. As you read this play, remember the kind of world it is set in, and think about how it reveals these ideas:

1. How love can confer integrity upon two very young people.
2. How tragedy can be caused when old people's rage is carried over to a younger generation.
3. How humans can often be powerless to bring into being the kind of world we'd like to live in.
4. How innocence, virtue, and beauty can be destroyed.
5. How a disordered and chaotic world can bring disaster down on the humans who live in it.

A Brief Word List

Shakespeare wrote this play almost four hundred years ago. It's not surprising, then, that many words are by now **archaic**, which means that they (or their particular meanings) have disappeared from common use. The sidenotes in the play will help you with these archaic words and with other words and expressions that might be unfamiliar to you. Here are some of the archaic words repeatedly used in the play.

- 'a: he.
a': on.
an', or and: if.
Anon!: Soon! Right away! Coming!
but: if, or only.
Good-den or **go-den** or **God-den**: Good evening. (This would be spoken in the late afternoon. You will still hear people in the British Isles referring to the late afternoon as "evening.")
hap, or **happy**: luck, or lucky.
humor: mood, or moisture.
Jack: a common fellow, an ordinary guy.
maid: a young unmarried girl.
mark: listen.
Marry!: a mild oath, shortened from "By the Virgin Mary!"
nice: trivial, foolish.
owes: owns.
shrift: confession or forgiveness for sins confessed to a priest. To be given absolution after confession was to be **shriven**.
Soft!: Quiet! Hush! Slow up!
Stay!: Wait! **STAY!**
with: with that, with. **WITHAL**
wot: know.

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