

William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare (1564 - 1616) was baptized, according to the parish register of Holy Trinity Church, **Stratford-upon-Avon**, on April 26, 1564. His birthday has been traditionally celebrated on April 23, St George's Day, although there is no documentary basis for this. Seven brothers and sisters were baptized in the same church, of whom three died in childhood. The youngest, Edmund Shakespeare, born in 1580, became an actor in London and was buried in Southwark Cathedral in 1607.

Stratford was an important market centre, with a population of nearly two thousand inhabitants. Shakespeare's father was John Shakespeare, his mother Mary was a member of the Arden family on whose estates John Shakespeare's father had worked. John Shakespeare was living in Stratford by 1552, with a business making gloves and curing leather; he also dealt in wool. His house in Henley Street, Stratford, can still be seen; it is known as the **Birthplace**, since William Shakespeare is thought to have been born there. In 1568 John Shakespeare was high bailiff (mayor) of the town, but he seems to have had hard times in the late 1580s and early 1590s. He died in 1601.

There was a grammar school in Stratford, the King's New School, where William probably studied free of charge for a number of years, mostly mastering Latin grammar, literature and history. The school-room can still be seen. Late in 1582, in his 19th year, William was given permission to marry a local girl, Anne Hathaway, then aged 26, without the usual three weeks' delay, by a special bishop's bond. On May 26, 1583, their first daughter Susanna was baptized. On February 2, 1585 his twins Hamnet (his only son, who died in 1596) and Judith were baptized, receiving the names of close friends of the family.

Nothing is known of how Shakespeare came to London and into the theater. He may have been tutor to a Catholic family in the north of England for a time. He had probably become an actor in London by 1589, if not before. The first document mentioning him in connection with the theater is an attack on him in *A Groatworth of Wit* (1592) by the dramatist **Robert Greene**: "an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers, that 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 fac totum*, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country." Greene does not directly name Shakespeare, but he is parodying a line from *3 Henry VI* ("O tiger's heart wrapp'd in a woman's hide"). Greene died soon after this, and his collaborator in printing this attack, Henry Chettle, offered an apology to Shakespeare printed the same year in his *Kind Heart's Dream*: "myself have seen his demeanor no less civil than he excellent in the quality (*acting*) he professes. Besides, divers of worship (*various men of high rank*) have reported his uprightness of dealing, which argues his honesty, and his facetious grace in writing, that approves his art."

From summer 1592 until spring 1594, a high number of plague deaths kept the London theaters closed. During this time of forced inactivity, Shakespeare published his two long poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*, both dedicated to Henry Wriothesley, the 3rd Earl of Southampton (*see page 228*). At Christmas 1594 a newly constituted company of actors performed twice before the Queen, for which they received 20 pounds, the receipt being signed by **William Shakespeare**, **William Kempe** (the company's famous clown), and **Richard Burbage**. In 1598 we know that Shakespeare acted in **Ben Jonson's** *Every Man in His Humour*, and in 1603 in his *Sejanus*, but on the whole he was not famous as an actor. He is said to have played the role of Hamlet's father's ghost.

The company was first called the '**Lord Chamberlain's Men**' in 1597, when George, Lord Hunsdon received that title. At first they were known as 'Lord Hunsdon's men'. At the end of 1596, they presented all six of the Christmas plays at court and they, together with

Henslowe's Admiral's Men, were the leading actors of the London theatrical scene, especially after a play presented by Pembroke's Men at the Swan early in 1597, *The Isle of Dogs*, brought about the arrest of Ben Jonson and the suppression of that company.

The first serious critical evaluation of Shakespeare's work comes in a 1598 work by **Francis Meres**, *Palladis Tamia: Wit's Treasury* where English poets are compared with the Greek, Roman and Italian poets:

As Plautus and Seneca are accounted the best for comedy and tragedy among the Latins: so Shakespeare among the English is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage; for comedy, witness his *Gentlemen of Verona*, his *Errors*, his *Love Labours Lost*, his *Love Labours Won*, his *Midsummer's Night Dream*, & his *Merchant of Venice*: for tragedy his *Richard the 2.* *Richard the 3.* *Henry the 4.* *King John*, *Titus Andronicus* and his *Romeo and Juliet*.

This text is a great help in dating the plays, as well as indicating how highly Shakespeare was esteemed quite early in his writing career.

When the lease on the land where the Theatre stood expired in April 1597, two months after the death of James Burbage, the Chamberlain's Men could not renew it. So on 28 December, 1598, they secretly tore down the building and carried the main beams across the Thames to use in building the **Globe**. At this time, when money must have been a problem, the main actors including Shakespeare made themselves into a company, each one of the shareholders being part-owner. Shakespeare's share gave him ten percent of any profits they made.

Nothing is known of Shakespeare's family life; there is no sign that his wife or daughters came to live with him in London, where he stayed in houses close to the Theatre, then to the Globe. By 1597, Shakespeare had made enough money to buy the second largest house in Stratford, the Great House in New Place; this house was torn down by its 18th century owner, who hated tourists! He also bought farm land and another smaller house later; from 1597 his family seems to have been living in New Place, and he also made investments locally.

One major change in the actors Shakespeare was writing his plays for occurred in 1599-1600 when the clown Will Kempe left the company, perhaps after some kind of row about his old-fashioned style of clowning; in his place came Robert Armin, who seems to have been a more refined comedian with a fine singing voice.

When King James became king in 1603, he quickly made Shakespeare's company into **The King's Men**. When James entered London for his coronation in 1604, Shakespeare and eight other members of the company were in the procession, wearing the king's livery. By 1609, the King's Men were using the hall of the old Blackfriars monastery, an independent area to the west of the City, as their main playhouse; it gave greater intimacy to plays designed, perhaps, for a more select audience. Certainly entry cost more. Also in 1609, Shakespeare's 154 *Sonnets* were published in a quarto volume by Thomas Thorpe. Two of these sonnets had already been published without his permission in a volume called *The Passionate Pilgrim* in 1599; it is not known whether the 1609 edition had his permission or not.

It seems that Shakespeare retired from London to live in Stratford in about 1611, after writing *The Tempest* and parts of *Henry VIII*. In January 1615 (or 1616?) he made his will, leaving most of his land to his favourite daughter Susanna, who had married John Hall of Stratford in 1607 and had one daughter, Elizabeth. His other daughter, Judith, only married in 1616. She received only a little in the will, since Shakespeare tried to transmit all his land as a

complete estate to his grandsons; after he died Judith had three sons, but all died young and the family line ceased, since Elizabeth Hall had no children.

The only mention of Shakespeare's wife in the will, "I give unto my wife my second best bed with the furniture," has been much discussed. It may be that his widow had automatic rights during her lifetime to a third of her dead husband's estate. After Judith married, some changes were made to the will on 25 March 1616, and here Shakespeare's signature is very shaky.

Less than a month later he died, on April 23, 1616, and was buried on April 25 inside the parish church, near the altar, in a place of honor because he was one of the churchwardens of the parish. Directly over the coffin a stone was laid with the words:

*Good frend for Jesus sake forbear
To digg the dust enclosed heare.
Blese be the man that spares these stones
And curst be he that moves my bones*

This request seems to have been respected, the stone is still in place. A few years later a fine monument was set up on the wall of the church near the grave, offering the first portrait of Shakespeare that we have. His hand is holding a quill pen, showing that he is being celebrated as a writer. The Dutchman who made the statue, Gheerart Janssen, had a shop in Southwark near the Globe, so he perhaps knew Shakespeare personally.

In 1623 his colleagues of the King's Men, John Heminges and Henry Condell, with others, brought out a complete edition of Shakespeare's plays in folio size, the so-called First Folio containing 36 plays (not *Pericles* or the poems). Further editions in folio form followed in 1632, 1664, 1685. In his lifetime 19 of the plays had been published separately, in small quarto volumes, some twelve of them offered as official versions ("good quartos"), the others published without permission and in some cases representing a very different version from that found in the Folios ("bad quartos"). The plays in the First Folio seem to have been very carefully prepared for printing from the best possible copies available at that time; the big question, about which there is much debate, is how much the plays had been revised by Shakespeare or others over the years. Ben Jonson used to rewrite his plays for publication, but in Shakespeare's case this seems not to have been done.

A chronology of Shakespeare's works

It is not possible to date most of the plays very precisely; what follows represents one way of grouping the plays in a rough chronological order. The dates are mostly only indicative, to within a couple of years; the mention (tragedy) indicates the use of the word in the title of Quarto editions:

1) Early Chronicle Histories 1590-3

King John (perhaps before 1590)

The date of this play is debated; some critics put it much later, about 1596, and think that Shakespeare was adapting a play written by an unknown writer, *The Troublesome Raigne of Iohn King of England*, that was printed in 1591. Others believe that Shakespeare's work came first and point to the echo in it of sentiments widespread in England just after the defeat of the 1588 Spanish Armada.

The First “Tetralogy”:

1 Henry VI

2 Henry VI

3 Henry VI

Richard III (tragedy)

The term **tetralogy** (group of four plays) is not strictly accurate, because each play was probably written to be acted alone. The three parts of Henry VI, dealing with the complicated events of the Wars of the Roses, form a very episodic “mini-series” that culminates in the reign of the usurper Richard III. His death at the end of his “tragedy” is shown to bring healing and peace in the shape of Henry VII and the Tudor Dynasty.

2) Early Classical works 1590-4

Titus Andronicus (tragedy)

Venus and Adonis (poem published 1593)

The Rape of Lucrece (poem published 1594)

It is not sure when *Titus Andronicus* was written; some critics find it so strange a play that they date it very early. It may be more helpful, though, to see these three works together as a special commission given to Shakespeare to help him during the plague years. There is a manifest strain in each of them, as though the writer feels uncomfortable with the story he is telling. In each work, sex, violence and death are central. The poems are dedicated to Henry Wriothesley, the earl of Southampton, about whose relationship with Shakespeare there is much speculation.

3) Early Italian Comedies 1590-5

The Taming of the Shrew

The Comedy of Errors

Love’s Labours Lost

Two Gentlemen of Verona

These plays do not always satisfy critics as deeply as later comedies, yet they are mostly a pleasure on the stage. *The Taming of the Shrew* has been the focus of much feminist criticism while it remains very popular on stage and screen.

4) Early Romances 1594-6

Romeo and Juliet (tragedy)

A Midsummer Night’s Dream

The Merchant of Venice

The Sonnets (poems)

The poetry of these plays, like that of *Richard II* which was written around the same time, shows a great development from that of the early plays. Sometimes the verse becomes almost an end in itself, an exhibition of decorative skills that create a mannered, formal atmo-

sphere. *Richard II* is the only play by Shakespeare entirely in verse. The dating of the sonnets is unsure, since they were only published in 1609; the sonnets and fragments of sonnets embedded in *Romeo and Juliet* and the themes of these plays seem to suggest an interest in the genre at this time.

5) The Second “Tetralogy” 1596-8

Richard II (tragedy)
Henry IV Part I
Henry IV Part II
Henry V

It seems that Shakespeare had reached a clear reading of recent English history before ever writing any of his history plays; the plays of the **second tetralogy** show the events leading up to the Wars of the Roses. It has been suggested that the second Henry IV play was not originally planned, but was provoked by the immense popularity of the comic figure of Falstaff. Yet it is not likely that Shakespeare would have written the first play without including the death of Henry, found near the end of Part II.

The main unifying element in these four plays is dynastic: Henry IV, as Bolingbroke, takes power from Richard II (who is then murdered in prison); but Henry IV’s reign is a struggle for stability as his legitimacy is challenged by rebels following his example. During both plays, Henry is troubled by the wild behaviour of Prince Hal, his son, who is transformed when he becomes king and dismisses Falstaff at the end of the second Henry IV play. *Henry V* is heroic in tone, recording the events of a reign that was a legend in Shakespeare’s England, culminating in the English victory at Agincourt. But the Wars of the Roses, during which England lost all its French possessions, overshadow the play’s celebration of national expansionism and this prevents too simple an interpretation.

6) Comedies 1598-1604

Much Ado About Nothing
As You Like It
Twelfth Night
The Merry Wives of Windsor

To these should be added the “problem comedies”:

All’s Well That Ends Well (1602-4)
Measure For Measure (1604)

Each of these plays shows high skill, except perhaps for *The Merry Wives* which was probably written on commission for Windsor, with Falstaff making a fool of himself in a slapstick way. These comedies have darker shadows, more tragic possibilities are suggested; death stalks, love is fragile. The two **problem comedies** are so called because they are virtual tragedies, where happiness is only saved by very complicated games of substitution and deceit. They are sometimes called tragi-comedies and can also be read in combination with such plays as *Troilus*.

7) Tragedies 1600-8

Julius Caesar (1600)
Hamlet (1601)
Troilus and Cressida (1602)
Othello (1604)
King Lear (1605)
Macbeth (1606)
Antony and Cleopatra (1606)
Coriolanus (1607)
Timon of Athens (1608)

These are the works for which Shakespeare is most famous. They can be roughly divided according to their sources: some are based on Holinshed's *Chronicles*, some on romances, and some on Plutarch's *Lives* and other classical sources.

Shakespeare had no fixed theory of tragedy and shows no interest in what Aristotle wrote in the *Poetics*. For him tragedy is a matter of the catastrophic death of a person, usually high-placed, in the "Fall of Princes" tradition; it is not helpful to look for a "tragic flaw" in his protagonists. Each age has responded in its own way to these works, leaving a huge critical heritage.

8) The Late Romances 1608-11

Pericles
Cymbeline
The Winter's Tale
The Tempest

The last plays are experimental, in their use of time and in their mixtures of comedy with tragic elements in the tradition of romance; they are sometimes called "the late romances". It may be the way these plays resist simple labels that has made them so appealing to the present age. They are often acted.

Henry VIII, of which only parts are by Shakespeare, is less studied or acted than the others. It is notorious because during a performance of it in 1613, the thatched roof of the Globe caught fire and the whole building was destroyed. It was included in the Folio of Shakespeare's works, but was written in collaboration with John Fletcher. So too was the play *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (not in the Folio) based on Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, and first published in a 1634 "good" quarto with both writers' names on the title-page. Shakespeare seems to have contributed the first and last acts.

Other Poems and Plays

In 1601 a certain Robert Chester published a very strange work called *Love's Martyr*, in which was included the poem *The Phoenix and Turtle* by Shakespeare, as well as poems by Marston, Chapman and Jonson. There is nothing at all like *The Phoenix and Turtle* in the rest of Shakespeare's work, it is very hard to see just how serious he was in composing it.

The poem is a celebration of lovers' union transcending death, since that is the story told in Chester's work, where a turtle-dove whose mate has died and the phoenix go together into the flames:

So they loved, as love in twain
Had the essence but in one:
Two distincts, division none;
Number there in love was slain.

Shakespeare contributed 147 lines to a play by various writers called *Sir Thomas More*, the manuscript of which is in the British Library; this is the only literary manuscript by Shakespeare, a play that was probably never performed or published. It serves to show how difficult Shakespeare's handwriting was to read, if nothing else. He may well have helped write the anonymous play *Edward III* (published 1596). The domestic tragedy *Arden of Faversham* (1592) used to be thought to be by Shakespeare, but although it has impressive qualities, critics do not usually now attribute any part of it to him.

Of the plays in the Folio, some probably or certainly include passages not written by Shakespeare: *Timon of Athens* (one third by Thomas Middleton), *Macbeth* (the Hecate speeches by Middleton), some parts of *1 Henry VI*, of the first act of *Titus Andronicus*.... *Pericles*, not in the Folio, only exists in a quarto of 1609; the first two acts may not be by Shakespeare.

Editions: quartos and folios

Nineteen of the plays published in the First Folio also exist in quarto editions, published earlier, and since there is no author's manuscript of any play, modern editors of these plays have to decide as best they can which version is closer to what Shakespeare wrote. In twelve cases there exists a quarto usually claimed to be a "good" one, printed from Shakespeare's manuscript. *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*, are particularly interesting since quarto and folio versions offer considerable differences that at times seem to have equal value and it is not possible simply to reject either. Editors usually make texts by combining readings from Quartos and Folio, but at least in recent years there is increased interest in seeing the different versions that could exist of the same play, and less in reconstructing an authorial text that may never have existed.

When Shakespeare had finished writing a play, he gave his text to the company. This authorial manuscript is called "foul papers" because it often contained corrections made while writing. Often a copy was made at once, the prompt book for regular use in preparing and supervising a performance, in which the name of the character speaking was systematically marked, together with the moment of each character's entrance and exit. The author often forgot or varied such details, or left them vague. In the second Quarto of *Romeo and Juliet* (1599) we find Lady Capulet called Lady, Lady of the house, Mother, Capulet's wife, Wife, Old Lady. This almost certainly shows that the Quarto was set directly from Shakespeare's foul papers. Sometimes he wrote the name of the actor he was thinking of in composing the part.

There are many details of spelling, or individual words that vary between different printings, of course. Some of the quartos offer great variations of basic text, though, that have been explained by seeing them as pirated editions based not on an official text but on the

memory of one or two actors who have perhaps lost their job and need to make some money. These actors remember well their own parts, and the scenes where they were on stage; the rest of the play, though, is not so well remembered. Such quartos are called memorial reconstructions or reports; the most remarkable is probably the quarto of *Richard III* where it seems that the 1597 text was compiled by a whole company dictating their lines to a scribe after they had lost their prompt-book while on tour.

Some plays were so successful that they were simply imitated in their broad outlines by someone who had watched them a few times. *The Taming of a Shrew* (1594) may be the result of such a process; but there are similar versions of parts 2 and 3 of *Henry VI*, while the anonymous quarto play *The Troublesome Raigne of Iohn King of England* (1591) is perhaps a similar adaptation, although some critics still consider it to be the source of Shakespeare's play.

Shakespeare's sources

Where did Shakespeare get the plots of his plays? The editor of each play in the Arden, or New Cambridge, or other major series, devotes a major section of their introduction to the source, for it is one of the most important questions, since here it becomes clear what changes Shakespeare introduced in shaping the material for his own purposes.

The English Chronicle Histories are mainly based on the 2nd edition (1587) of the great *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* by Raphael Holinshed, two heavy folio volumes containing three and a half million words about British history from the sons of Noah until the year of publication. These gave Shakespeare basic material for the two tetralogies, for *King John*, *Henry VIII*, and the tragedies *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and probably *Cymbeline*. Yet for every play he seems to have used other sources too, some of them quite obscure, in the course of turning long historical narratives into vivid theatrical representations. In many ways, Shakespeare created his own reading of history.

Shakespeare did not invent the English historical play, but he perfected the form. On the Contents page of the 1623 Folio, the plays are divided into Comedies, Histories, Tragedies, although only the first and last were recognized genres before him. In his fascination with history, Shakespeare was a typical Elizabethan, and these plays are essentially political debates. They all represent the negotiation between royal power and national law in various ways, and are far more subversive than the work of Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, suggests. They show social instability, civil war, and tyranny threatening the English Nation as a whole. A good king is one who is good for England; in the event of a weak or evil king, history shows that regicide happens. By putting regicide on the stage in *Richard II*, Shakespeare was unwittingly helping prepare the ground for the execution of Charles I in 1649. The official absolutist ideology of the divine right of kings is most openly referred to by Richard II, whose example shows most clearly that kings are not absolute and can be deposed.

The comedies have various sources, and some no clear sources at all; this is only natural, since in them Shakespeare is dealing with a universal material having a vast history. In *A Natural Perspective* (1965) Northrop Frye writes: "Comedy... is primarily an impetus to completing a certain kind of movement." The comic impetus is, he says, "a drive towards identity." "The normal action of a comedy moves from irrational law to festivity." All of this would seem to be true of the narrative genre known as romance, and it is not surprising that Shakespeare very often dramatizes stories found in romances.

The setting in Italy of virtually all the comedies, as well as the "romantic" tragedies *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*, seems to signify a deeply felt need to have these events occur in a space not immediately familiar, partly perhaps because the plays' events themselves are

so familiar, both in literature and in life. In *Twelfth Night* the characters are essentially English, even in name (Sir Toby Belch) but the setting is Ilyria.

As in the classical Roman and Greek comedies, the central action involves youthful love overcoming various obstacles or, in the case of the tragedies, failing to overcome them. Each of Shakespeare's comedies ends in marriage, often more than one, and this event is always social as well as individual. At least two of the most popular comedies, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*, have no source at all beyond Shakespeare's imagination, and other great comedies, such as *Twelfth Night*, have only indirect links with their sources in European comedy or romance.

In his early essay, "The Argument of Comedy" (1948) Northrop Frye put forward the idea that "tragedy is really implicit or uncompleted comedy... comedy contains a potential tragedy within itself". He used this to construct a dramatology based on a mythical structure of cyclic time. We have already seen the English theater developing a unique mixed mode of tragedy-in-comedy, comedy-in-tragedy that finds its climax in the tragedies of Marlowe and Shakespeare.

The very great Shakespearean A. C. Bradley (1851-1935) in his *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904) proposed limiting his study to the four so-called "Great Tragedies" *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, chosen because in them he found works that he could compare with the great tragedies of Greece. Today, the prestige of Greek drama being less, it is usual to consider together all the plays listed as tragedies, be they the great four or the five Roman and Greek tragedies, as well as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Titus Andronicus*.

The main source for the Roman plays was Sir Thomas North's *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* ("Plutarch's Lives") which he translated from the French version of the original Greek made by James Amyot and which went through various editions after the first in 1579. The ethos of ancient Rome suggested by Plutarch is again far removed from the familiar English world; in the Roman plays there is a strong note of civic pride and austerity, far less comic play, and the representation of ritual suicide as an affirmation of individual dignity.

Julius Caesar, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus* are often studied rather too much together, although it is clear that their fundamental conflicts are very different from one another. If *Julius Caesar* is a study in the perception of power and the possibility of regicide, *Antony and Cleopatra* is centred in a conflict between statesmanship and passion; *Coriolanus* dramatizes conflict between personal power and the will of the people. *Timon of Athens*, set in Greece but also having its source in North, although only a brief mention, belongs to the same group, but is about the conflict between the individual and society.

Othello and *Troilus and Cressida* have their origins in romance, although in both plays the sources are very much changed. *King Lear* begins as a story found in Holinshed and already familiar in earlier versions, but has been radically changed by Shakespeare in the later acts. *Macbeth*, too, represents a combination of material from quite different sections in Holinshed. Only *Hamlet* is difficult to discuss, because it seems sure that Shakespeare was working on an older play that has not come down to us; it is therefore deeply intriguing to wonder, without being able to know, exactly what he has kept and what has been transformed.

The tragedies are still the most often studied plays by Shakespeare, they are his most challenging works. In each one there is a central individual that the audience is invited to feel deep concern for; the spectacle is offered of a testing of that person's human integrity, involving a suffering that teaches us few lessons, except the fact that there is human suffering, with death at the end. In the course of the play forces come into conflict that often can only be called "good" and "evil" yet there is at times great ambiguity in these values.

Each play has a private and a public, social side to its action, and the combination brings together the themes of comedy and history-play to yield something richer than either.

In his later plays, Shakespeare is found experimenting in remarkable ways with themes of loss and recovery. The form he finally prefers is romance, *Pericles* being directly inspired by the Greek romance “Apollonius of Tyre” in the form given it by Gower in his *Confessio Amantis*. *The Winter’s Tale* is a careful dramatizing of Robert Greene’s prose romance *Pandosto* (1588). *Cymbeline* has its sources in Holinshed but it is pure romance in the story it tells of love lost and restored. Finally, *The Tempest* expresses perhaps Shakespeare’s ultimate perfection of comic vision. It has no source and in it Shakespeare returns to the problem of the father-daughter relationship that recurs in various forms throughout his works.

The Sonnets

The **sonnets** were first printed in 1609, when sonnet cycles had already lost much of their popularity. They have become very popular in the present century, partly because of the strangeness of their subject matter: a large number of the poems are in praise of the beauty of a young man, and most of the sonnets suggest complicated and painful human relationships that are in strong contrast to the idealizing mode of the Petrarchan tradition.

It is not sure that there is an overall order to the sonnets, but there are certain groups of poems that belong together. The main problem, that has been much discussed but cannot be solved, is how much of Shakespeare’s own private life is expressed in the poems. There is no guarantee that the speaker of the poems is William Shakespeare the dramatist, any more than Astrophel “is” Sidney.

The origin of most debate is the printer’s dedication at the start of the book:

*To the onlie begetter of
these insuing sonnets
Mr W. H. all happinesse
and that eternitie
promised
by
our ever-living Poet
wisheth
the well-wishing
adventurer in
setting
forth
T. T.*

Countless writers have identified the dedication’s Mr W. H. with the unnamed young man of the poems, and then looked for his name in contemporary records. However, it has recently been suggested convincingly that the H is simply a misprint for S: the “only begetter” can only really mean “the writer” and his initials we know to be W. S.. Part of the confusion has been caused by a failure to realize that “our ever-living Poet” is God, not Shakespeare (“poet” being the Greek for “Maker”). T.T. is Thomas Thorpe the printer.

Sonnets 1 - 17 are celebrations of the young man’s beauty with an argument urging him to marry and have children so that his beauty may survive the wrecks of time. Sonnet 18, though, marks a new stage by affirming that the poem itself gives permanence:

So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Sonnets 18 - 32 are celebrations of love for the young man, sonnet 20 stating clearly that this love is not homo-*sexual*. The most famous in this group is sonnet 30, a development of themes begun in 29:

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste:
(...)

But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
All losses are restored and sorrows end.

Sonnets 33 - 42 suggest that a problem has arisen in this relationship, the poet's mistress has seduced the young man, showing the poet that his beloved friend is fallible and challenging a certain exclusive possessiveness. Yet the last poems in the section reaffirm the poet's readiness to let the young man do as he likes, even take his mistress!

In **sonnets 43 - 58** the poet seems to be on a journey away from the friend, and there are suggestions of a portrait being used to refresh memory, while absence brings fears of betrayal. **Sonnets 59 - 75** are full of reflections on the effects of Time, and even on the (older) poet's approaching death; they return to the idea (conceit) that the poem stops the course of time.

In some of these sonnets the theme of jealousy is present again. In the next section, **sonnets 76 - 96**, a further mysterious figure is mentioned, the "rival poet" who is also writing in praise of the youth, and there are hints that he feels that their relationship is breaking down on account of the corruption of the people that the youth is associating with:

(from sonnet 94)

The summer's flower is to the summer sweet,
Though to itself it only live and die,
But if that flower with base infection meet,
The basest weed outbraves his dignity:
For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.

Sonnets 97 - 108 seem to come after a period of absence, and again are full of praise and strain that lead into the last section of sonnets for the friend, **sonnets 109 - 126**. Here the tone is often defensive, as though the writer has been accused of unfaithfulness; the tone is less affirmative, the meaning of the words is sometimes obscure, and there may be irony, even in such a well-known poem as 116:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments; love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to move:
O, no, it is an ever-fixed mark...

Sonnet 126, the last of the main group of sonnets, consists of six couplets affirming the power of Time over the friend.

Sonnets 127 - 154 are addressed to, or concern, a woman, the so-called 'dark lady' whose identity has also been endlessly sought. In some poems, the friend of the earlier poems is introduced in the triangular relationship already mentioned. The tone of many of these poems is dark and violent; there are striking variations from poem to poem, and some critics have tried to change their order, but to no profit. The passions and contradictions contained in these poems are utterly unlike anything found in any other collection of sonnets.

The nearest that Shakespeare ever comes to Petrarchan conventions is this well-known parody of Petrarchan themes (130):

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

The last two poems, **sonnets 153 - 4**, are alternative versions of a classical poem about Cupid; they have no clear relationship with the main body of poems.