**Theatrical Beginnings**

By 1592, there is evidence William Shakespeare earned a living as an actor and a playwright in London and possibly had several plays produced.

Scholars agree that Shakespeare was reaching above his rank, trying to match better known and educated playwrights like Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Nashe or Greene himself.

By the early 1590s, documents show William Shakespeare was a managing partner in the Lord Chamberlain's Men, an acting company in London. After the crowning of King James I, in 1603, the company changed its name to the King's Men. From all accounts, the King's Men company was very popular, and records show that Shakespeare had works published and sold as popular literature. The theater culture in 16th century England was not highly admired by people of high rank. However, many of the nobility were good patrons of the performing arts and friends of the actors.

**Establishing Himself**

By 1597, 15 of the 37 plays written by William Shakespeare were published. Civil records show that at this time he purchased the second largest house in Stratford, called New House, for his family. It was a four-day ride by horse from Stratford to London, so it is believed that Shakespeare spent most of his time in the city writing and acting and came home once a year during the 40-day Lenten period, when the theaters were closed.

By 1599, William Shakespeare and his business partners built their own theater on the south bank of the Thames River, which they called the Globe. In 1605, Shakespeare purchased leases of real estate near Stratford for 440 pounds, which doubled in value and earned him 60 pounds a year. This made him an entrepreneur as well as an artist, and scholars believe these investments gave him the time to write his plays uninterrupted.

**Writing Style**

William Shakespeare's early plays were written in the conventional style of the day, with elaborate metaphors and rhetorical phrases that didn't always align naturally with the story's plot or characters. However, Shakespeare was very innovative, adapting the traditional style to his own purposes and creating a freer flow of words.

**Early Works: Histories and Comedies**

With the exception of *Romeo and Juliet*, William Shakespeare's first plays were mostly histories written in the early 1590s. *Richard II*, *Henry VI* (parts 1, 2 and 3) and *Henry V* dramatize the destructive results of weak or corrupt rulers, and have been interpreted by drama historians as Shakespeare's way of justifying the origins of the Tudor Dynasty. Shakespeare also wrote several comedies during his early period: the witty romance *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the romantic *Merchant of Venice*, the wit and wordplay of *Much Ado About Nothing*, the charming *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*. Other plays, possibly written before 1600, include *Titus Andronicus*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

**Later Works: Tragedies and Tragicomedies**

It was in William Shakespeare's later period, after 1600, that he wrote the tragedies *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*. In these, Shakespeare's characters present vivid impressions of human temperament that are timeless and universal. Possibly the best known of these plays is *Hamlet*, which explores betrayal, retribution, incest and moral failure. These moral failures often drive the twists and turns of Shakespeare's plots, destroying the hero and those he loves.

In William Shakespeare's final period, he wrote several tragicomedies. Among these are *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. Though graver in tone than the comedies, they are not the dark tragedies of *King Lear* or *Macbeth* because they end with reconciliation and forgiveness.

**Death**

Tradition has it that William Shakespeare died on his birthday, April 23, 1616, though many scholars believe this is a myth. Church records show he was interred at Trinity Church on April 25, 1616. In his will, he left the bulk of his possessions to his eldest daughter, Susanna.

**Controversy and Literary Legacy**

About 150 years after his death, questions arose about the authorship of William Shakespeare's plays. Scholars and literary critics began to float names like **Christopher Marlowe, Edward de Vere and** [**Francis Bacon**](http://www.biography.com/people/francis-bacon-9194632)—men of more known backgrounds, literary accreditation, or inspiration—as the true authors of the plays. Official records from the Holy Trinity Church and the Stratford government record the existence of a William Shakespeare, but none of these attest to him being an actor or playwright.

Skeptics also questioned how anyone of such modest education could write with the intellectual perceptiveness and poetic power that is displayed in Shakespeare's works. Over the centuries, several groups have emerged that question the authorship of Shakespeare's plays.

The most serious and intense skepticism began in the 19th century when adoration for Shakespeare was at its highest. Members of the Shakespeare Oxford Society (founded in 1957) put forth arguments that English aristocrat Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, was the true author of the poems and plays of "William Shakespeare." The Oxfordians cite de Vere's extensive knowledge of aristocratic society, his education, and the structural similarities between his poetry and that found in the works attributed to Shakespeare. They contend that William Shakespeare had neither the education nor the literary training to write such eloquent prose and create such rich characters.

However, the vast majority of Shakespearean scholars contend that William Shakespeare wrote all his own plays. They point out that other playwrights of the time also had sketchy histories and came from modest backgrounds. They contend that Stratford's New Grammar School curriculum of Latin and the classics could have provided a good foundation for literary writers. Supporters of Shakespeare's authorship argue that the lack of evidence about Shakespeare's life doesn't mean his life didn't exist..

What seems to be true is that William Shakespeare was a respected man of the dramatic arts who wrote plays and acted in some in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. But his reputation as a dramatic genius wasn't recognized until the 19th century. Today, his plays are highly popular and constantly studied and reinterpreted in performances with diverse cultural and political contexts.