

William Shakespeare  
1564-1616

Life, Dating and the Comedies

# Shakespeare's life

- Marlowe's successor; his contemporaries saw him as a playwright among the others, no transcendent genius.
- It was the 18th century which first recognised Shakespeare's pre-eminence, ever since Rowe's edition of 1709.
- Many blanks in his biography. Points of reference: few documents in Stratford and what others told about him in London (Greene's insults 1592, Francis Meres's praise in *Palladis Tamia*, 1598). Reference to him as an **author**, not a workgroup or a pseudonym. (Bertinetti)

# A New Hypothesis?

- A new hypothesis?: He could have been Michelangelo Florio, a Sicilian immigrant (a friar converted to Protestantism).
- His mother's name was Guglielma S/Crollalanza (William = Guglielmo; Scrollare = Shake – Lancia = Spear)
- Or better his son Giovanni Florio (John Florio), the famous lexicographer, translator and humanist.
- See: <https://conoscerelastoria.it/il-mistero-william-shakespeare-in-realta-era-siciliano/>

# Shakespeare's indifference to the publication of his plays

- It was rare that his scripts became books. Shakespeare was interested in their **performance**.
- No authoritative collection of his works supervised by the author appeared in his lifetime.
- Texts of **16** plays were printed individually during Shakespeare's time. Some were taken from the author's "foul papers" = unrevised drafts ("good" quartos), some were "bad" quartos (corrupt, pirated editions). They were all casual publications, in which the author had no hand.
- *1623 First Folio*: collection of **18** of his works edited by Henry **Condell** and John **Heminges** (two actor's of his company) from the author's heavily corrected original drafts.

# Which edition represents what Shakespeare wrote?

- **In-quarto**: a volume in small format where each page corresponds to a quarter of the large sheet of paper used for the press.
- **In-folio**: a large format volume where two pages corresponds to a single sheet.
- Sometimes we have different versions of the same play: for 4 of them we have only the *Folio* text and that of a corrupt quarto; for others we have good and bad quartos and *Folio* texts, with variations.
- Industry of Shakespeare's scholarship has worked on comparing different versions and dating his works.

# Dating of the plays

- 1) **External evidence** (a clear mention or reference to a particular play. It does not offer the date of the first performance but it shows that the play was written before a certain date)
- 2) **Internal evidence** (the play itself includes a reference to an identifiable event)
- 3) **Stylistic evidence** (this method is the most difficult. But the changes in Shakespeare's style are noticeable. This helps to place a play in a precise period of evolution).

# The Magic of Language

- The way stories are told: extraordinary story-teller.
- Good education but London is also inspiring: a metropolis, a big commercial port, a cross-section of cultures and people. Echo of everything that happened in the world.
- Language: everyday speech is transformed poetically in the creative process (unexpected locutions, rhetorical figures, strange emphases give unusual tone to the content). Ability to raise common language to the level of poetry.
- Theatrical conventions were well-known to the public and made the events in the performance credible (a tree for a forest, reference to Saturn → saturnine dispirited, depressed).
- Fixed, stylised stage → Total delegation to the spoken word.

# Myths and archetypes

- Like classic writers, he has given us myths and archetypes. No gods or heroes in the Christian or modern world. Homer and Greek tragedians are at the root of all Western culture in terms of imagery and archetypal figures.
- Shakespeare's characters constitute the archetype of an attitude and a form of experience, they have become synonymous of a particular mode of being.

# Characters who achieve the status of archetypes

- Othello → jealousy
- Hamlet → the anguish of doubt
- Macbeth → thirst for power
- Falstaff → reckless vitality
- Romeo and Juliet → limitless love
- (like Greek Oedipus, Medea, Antigone, Helen, Achilles; Cervantes' s Don Quixote, and Mozart's Don Juan)

# Comedies vs Tragedies

- From chaos to order, from disintegration to reconstruction and harmony
  - Happy ending with marriage (symbol of social aggregation) or reunification of dismembered families or of twins and brothers/sisters separated at birth.
  - Romantic comedies: love
- From harmony , balance and unity to disharmony, disintegration and chaos.
  - Fall of a hero for a fatal flaw (ambition, power, jealousy, inactivity, vanity).
  - Death of the protagonist involves the death of a whole world and the passage to a new stage/ kingdom .

# Romantic Comedies

- Protagonists are often **women** (witty, intelligent, enterprising): Rosalind, Viola /'vliələ/ Female parts are acted by young men → cross-dressing for most of the play to render the action more plausible on the stage → *As You Like it (AY)* and *Twelfth Night (TN)*.
- **Twins are reunited**: Viola and Sebastian in *TN*. In *The Comedy of Errors (CE)*: a double set of twins = Antipholus of Ephesus and of Syracuse and their servants, both called Dromio.

# Shakespeare's Comedies

- They are made to **entertain**, not necessarily instruct. Moral or lesson (if there is one) is conveyed by **the fool or clown**: **Bottom** in *A Midsummer's Night Dream* (MD), **Touchstone** in AY, **Feste /festi/** in TN.
- The **fool** in Shakespeare = the character to whom the hidden sense of the play is entrusted, vehicle of profound truths through mocking jests, is wiser than the other characters. Also in *King Lear*.
- **Play Within the Play** (in MD Bottom's rehearsing the play they will act for the Duke's wedding, but also in *Hamlet*)

# Romantic Comedies

- **Complications:** unreturned love or people fall in love with the wrong person who, sometimes, is disguised as a man but is a woman (Olivia loves Viola dressed as Cesario, but she is also similar to her twin Sebastian; she will finally marry him) -→ from classical theatre: Plautus.
- **Mistaken identities.**

# City vs nature

- **City** = corrupt, dangerous, confused, chaotic, indifferent.
- **Wood** = pastoral world of simple life (**Arcadia**) where love and innocence triumph. The wood outside Athens in MD or the forest of Arden in AY. Shakespeare does not entirely follow pastoral conventions. The wood is also equated with freedom and magic, with a **carnival or dream world** where, through disguise and fake identities, the characters are able to achieve a better understanding of themselves, metamorphosis and change occur. When each of them goes back to town, s/he has become a new person. **Unmasking by masking**, you find your true self by disguising it → paradox
- Fantasy locations: Athens (MD), Illyria (TN) in Western Balkans, Sicily (CE), Forest of Arden (AY). Italy = exotic

First Performed	Plays	First Printed
1590-91	<a href="#"><u>Henry VI, Part II</u></a>	1594?
1590-91	<a href="#"><u>Henry VI, Part III</u></a>	1594?
1591-92	<a href="#"><u>Henry VI, Part I</u></a>	1623
1592-93	<a href="#"><u>Richard III</u></a>	1597
1592-93	<a href="#"><u>Comedy of Errors</u></a>	1623
1593-94	<a href="#"><u>Titus Andronicus</u></a>	1594
1593-94	<a href="#"><u>Taming of the Shrew</u></a>	1623
1594-95	<a href="#"><u>Two Gentlemen of Verona</u></a>	1623
1594-95	<a href="#"><u>Love's Labour's Lost</u></a>	1598?
1594-95	<a href="#"><u>Romeo and Juliet</u></a>	1597
1595-96	<a href="#"><u>Richard II</u></a>	1597
1595-96	<a href="#"><u>A Midsummer Night's Dream</u></a>	1600

1596-97	<u>King John</u>	1623
1596-97	<u>The Merchant of Venice</u>	1600
1597-98	<u>Henry IV, Part I</u>	1598
1597-98	<u>Henry IV, Part II</u>	1600
1598-99	<u>Much Ado About Nothing</u>	1600
1598-99	<u>Henry V</u>	1600
1599-1600	<u>Julius Caesar</u>	1623
1599-1600	<u>As You Like It</u>	1623
1599-1600	<u>Twelfth Night</u>	1623

1600-01	<a href="#">Hamlet</a>	1603
1600-01	<a href="#">The Merry Wives of Windsor</a>	1602
1601-02	<a href="#">Troilus and Cressida</a>	1609
1602-03	<a href="#">All's Well That Ends Well</a>	1623
1604-05	<a href="#">Measure for Measure</a>	1623
1604-05	<a href="#">Othello</a>	1622
1605-06	<a href="#">King Lear</a>	1608
1605-06	<a href="#">Macbeth</a>	1623
1606-07	<a href="#">Antony and Cleopatra</a>	1623
1607-08	<a href="#">Coriolanus</a>	1623
1607-08	<a href="#">Timon of Athens</a>	1623
1608-09	<a href="#">Pericles</a>	1609
1609-10	<a href="#">Cymbeline</a>	1623
1610-11	<a href="#">The Winter's Tale</a>	1623
1611-12	<a href="#">The Tempest</a>	1623
1612-13	<a href="#">Henry VIII</a>	1623