

The life of WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

BY JUSTIN EICK

Widely regarded as one of the finest playwrights ever, William Shakespeare's impressive body of work has remained in perpetual production on stages around the world for the past 400 years.

Since his arrival in London as a young playwright in the late 1590s, his contribution to the theatre has had a tremendous influence on actors, directors, writers, designers, producers and audiences across the globe.

Despite his enormous popularity, we actually know very little about the man himself. Indeed, the veritable dearth of information regarding his life has led some to question his authorship. What we do know about William Shakespeare is derived from two sources.

Foremost, official public records from a variety of sources provide a clear timeline of his family life and business affairs. Moreover, additional information about his life can be gleaned from his plays and poetry. A careful examination of these documents reveal certain key events in his life which directly contributed to his enormous success and enduring impact.

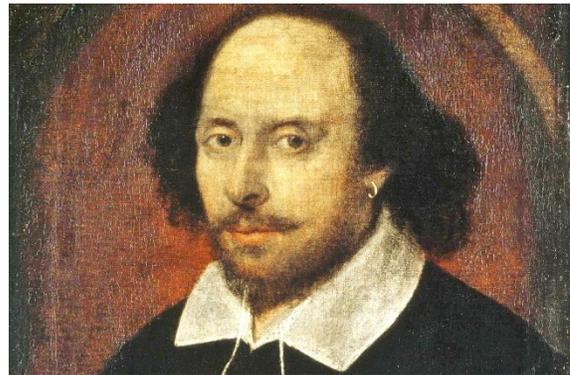


Figure 1: William Shakespeare - The Chandos Portrait

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1) Introduction	Pg. 1
2) Parents	Pg. 2
3) Early Years	Pg. 6
4) Life in London	Pg. 11
5) Final Years	Pg. 14
6) References	Pg. 16

SHAKESPEARE'S PARENTS

Like most things regarding William Shakespeare's life, little is known about his parents. However, the fact that their son would become perhaps the most famous playwright and poet ever requires an examination of their life – however meager the details.

MARY ARDEN

His mother was Mary Arden – the daughter of a wealthy farmer from a respected family. We don't have a birth certificate for Mary but most scholars place her birth in the late 1530s just outside Stratford-upon-Avon – a small town in central England.

Her father was Robert Arden whose surname was derived



Figure 2: Mary Arden's Farm

from the Forest of Arden in Warwickshire, England. As landed gentry, the family line can be traced back almost 500 years to the Norman Conquest in 1066.

In fact, the Arden family is one of only three families that can trace their lineage back to Anglo-Saxon times. Mary's ancestors fought in the War of the Roses and served on the court of King Henry VII. Upon her father's death, Mary

inherited his farm.

Some historians have speculated that Mary was illiterate because she used the mark of a running horse for a signature while others have proposed that she could in fact read and write based on surviving correspondence. The truth is, we have no evidence one way or the other.

What we do know is that she married a young leather worker from nearby Snitterfield named John Shakespeare.

JOHN SHAKESPEARE

Born in the mid-1530s, John was the son of a tenant farmer named Richard Shakespeare. Again, we don't have a birth certificate for John but

DID YOU KNOW ...

JOHN SHAKESPEARE'S FATHER WORKED ON LAND OWNED BY MARY ARDEN'S FATHER WHICH HAS PROMPTED SOME TO SPECULATE THAT PERHAPS THE COUPLE KNEW EACH OTHER AS CHILDREN.

historians believe he was born between 1531 and 1537.

John moved to Stratford in 1551 and in a few years was married to Mary. Although no marriage certificate for the young couple exists, scholars believe the two were married in 1557 for multiple reasons.

Foremost was the death of Mary's father in 1556. As a member of the landed gentry, it's unlikely that Robert Arden would have approved of his daughter marrying a simple yeoman from Snitterfield. With his death however, Mary and John would have only needed to wait the obligatory year of mourning before marrying.

More importantly, the birth of John and Mary's first child (Joan) in September of 1558 leads us to think the couple must have married in 1557 – one year after Robert Arden's death and one year before the birth of Joan.

John Shakespeare made his living as a glove maker and a "whittawer" (or leather worker). He was also elected to a number of public offices

including ale taster, constable, affeelor, burgess, chamberlain, alderman and high bailiff (or mayor). The position of "affeelor" was particularly interesting – essentially, you were an officer charged with assessing fines for offenses ... for which there was no set fine.

Like his wife, John used a mark as his signature (in this case, a pair of glovers' compasses) which has led historians to conjecture that he too was illiterate but no evidence exists to confirm such speculation. Despite his job as a leather worker, his multiple real estate

purchases would suggest additional income beyond that of a tradesman. Indeed, there is evidence that John was engaged in the practice of usury. Essentially a loan shark, John would lend money with exorbitant interest rates – a highly illegal practice at the time.

Historians also believe that he was a "brogger" or wool dealer. Since the crown held a state monopoly on the wool industry, John's side business of buying and selling wool, while extremely profitable, would have also been illegal.

JOHN SHAKESPEARE JACK OF ALL TRADES

During his life, John Shakespeare held nearly a dozen different jobs – many at the same time.

- ✓ Glove Maker
- ✓ Whittawer
- ✓ Ale Taster
- ✓ Constable
- ✓ Affeelor
- ✓ Burgess
- ✓ Chamberlain
- ✓ Alderman
- ✓ High Bailiff
- ✓ Brogger

FAMILY STRUGGLES

The decline of John Shakespeare appears to have begun in 1569 when his application for a coat of arms was denied. In 1572, John was brought to court twice on charges of illegally dealing in wool and in 1576, John Shakespeare abruptly withdrew from public life almost entirely.



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The family quickly amassed multiple debts and John found himself being sued by numerous creditors. In 1579, John was forced to mortgage Mary's estate to pay his mounting debts and by 1590, the couple had lost all of their property except their home on Henley Street in Stratford-upon-Avon.

John Shakespeare's sudden withdrawal from public life has

long been a source of puzzlement for historians.

Some scholars maintain that the family's decline can be partially attributed to the increasing dominance of Protestantism in England which must have been challenging for both John and Mary since they hailed from strongly Catholic families making it likely that the couple still secretly adhered to the Catholic faith.

Support for this theory can be found in documents from the period which reveal that John was fined for not attending Protestant church services in 1592.

Additionally, he refused to pay town levies to support strengthening the local militia against possible uprisings by Catholic sympathizers.

Finally, a handwritten testament of faith signed by John Shakespeare was discovered in 1757 in which he pledged himself to the Catholic Church.

Found in Shakespeare's Henley Street home, this document

(entitled *Testament of the Soule*) has only served to strengthen historians' belief that the family hewed closely to the Catholic faith.

Hence, it's reasonable to assume that the family's pervasive legal and financial troubles were likely the result of the couple's Catholic sympathies as well as John's status as a known brogger and loan-shark.

One other interesting theory has emerged regarding John Shakespeare's apparent decline that bears mentioning. Recent evidence has surfaced which has led some historians to believe that John Shakespeare purposely liquidated and then hid his assets to avoid the fines and estate seizures routinely experienced by Catholics under Queen Elizabeth's Protestant rule.

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

Regardless, the family's fortunes seem to have taken a public turn for the better in 1596 when John's application for a coat of arms was finally granted by the Garter King of Arms.



Figure 3: Mary and John Shakespeare's home on Henley Street

John was likely aided by the success of his son William who had risen considerably in stature as a popular and respected playwright in London. Adding to John's reversal of fortune was his readmission to the Stratford Town Council in 1599.

Although John would die a few years later in 1601 (with Mary passing away in 1608), he succeeded in restoring his family's reputation by establishing his heirs as members of the gentry.

THE SHAKESPEARE HOME

John and Mary Shakespeare's home on Henley Street still stands and is a popular destination for tourists who wish to visit Shakespeare's birthplace.

In the mid-1500s, William Shakespeare's family home was the largest house on Henley Street, and it's likely that John ran his leather-working business from there.

When his parents passed away, William Shakespeare inherited the house. He transformed part of the building into a popular tavern which he called the Swan and Maidenhead.

EARLY YEARS

Mary and John Shakespeare had a relatively large family with 4 boys and 4 girls. Three of the children died before reaching adulthood and only two of the remaining five

children married: their daughter Joan and their son, William.

BIRTH

Born in late April of 1564, William Shakespeare was Mary and John's third child and the first to survive past infancy.

Despite the fact that most historians mark the 23rd of

April as the date of Shakespeare's birth, we don't actually know on what day he was born as no written record of his birth exists.

However, we do know he was baptized on Tuesday, April 26th at the Church of the Holy Trinity in Stratford-upon-Avon since we have his baptismal certificate.



Figure 4: Church of the Holy Trinity in Stratford-upon-Avon

Using christening conventions of the time, historians have fixed Shakespeare's birth three days earlier on Sunday, April 23rd.

If nothing else, that particular date adds a poetic equilibrium to his life since he would die exactly 52 years later in 1616 on April 23rd.

The debate over the exact date of Shakespeare's birth is rendered somewhat moot by the fact that Shakespeare was actually born under the old Julian calendar which meant that April 23rd would in fact have been May 3rd under the modern Gregorian calendar used today.

SCHOOLING

While we have no evidence that Shakespeare had any formal education, it is generally accepted that he attended school at some point during his youth.

The first school students typically attended in Elizabethan England were known as "Petty Schools". Scholars believe that the word "petty" is most likely a

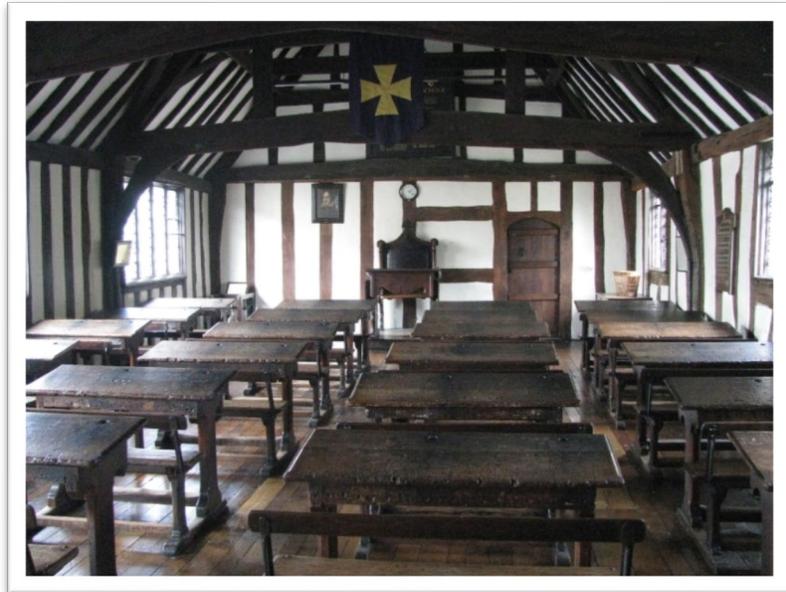


Figure 5: King's New School on Church Street in Stratford-upon-Avon

derivation of the French word "petite" meaning small.

These schools were also known as "Dame Schools" since the instructors were generally well-educated housewives from the neighborhood. For a small fee, boys between the ages of 5 and 7 were taught how to read and write using religious texts.

At the age of seven, boys would have enrolled in a free school (also known as a grammar school). Free schools were public schools at which students learned to read English, Latin and some Greek.

Students also learned grammar, logic and rhetoric. It is generally believed that the life of an English school boy in the late 16th century wasn't exactly easy – students at free schools were expected to attend class from 6:00 am to 5:00 pm, six days a week with exceptionally strict disciplinarians for teachers.

Young Will most likely would have attended King's New School, a well subsidized school for boys located on Church Street in Stratford. His father's position as alderman would have entitled William to a free



Figure 6: King's New School on Church Street in Stratford-upon-Avon

education (although parents were expected to provide paper, quills and ink for class).

The first textbook that William would have encountered was known as a "hornbook". This primer consisted of a piece of parchment containing the alphabet and the Lord's Prayer which was pasted to a paddle-shaped wooden board and covered with a transparent

sheet of horn.

In 1576, legal and financial difficulties within the family most likely ended any schooling in which young Shakespeare may have been involved.

We can't be sure as no evidence exists regarding Shakespeare's schooling but John Shakespeare's withdrawal from public life at that time

makes it likely that William's education would have been similarly impacted.

While young Will's early life remains a mystery, the one thing we do know for certainty is that he had several more brothers and sisters arrive during his youth: Gilbert (1566), Joan (1569), Anne (1571), Richard (1574) and Edmund (1580).

SHAKESPEARE'S WIFE

Our next record of William comes in November of 1582 when he married a girl by the name of Anne Hathaway from a small village just west of Stratford.

Even less is known about Anne than her husband. Her father was one Richard Hathaway, a yeoman farmer from Shottery. He died in 1581 and left Anne a small sum in his will (curiously, he called her "Agnes" in his final testament).

Shakespeare's marriage to Anne appears to have been a hasty one as evidenced by his willingness to pay £40 for a



Figure 7: Anne Hathaway



Figure 8: Anne Hathaway's Cottage

marriage bond to help expedite the occasion.

Anne was several years older than the 18 year old Will - a rarity in a time when men typically married in their late 20s. She was also at least three months pregnant at the time of the wedding which might help explain the rushed nuptials.

It should be noted however that it was not unusual for the bride to be pregnant on her wedding day at that time and the common notion that William's marriage to Anne was a "shotgun wedding" should be taken as conjecture only – the

truth is, we don't know under what circumstances William and Anne married.

STARTING A FAMILY

Six months after her marriage to William, Anne gave birth to Susanna Shakespeare in May of 1583. When Susanna was 24, she married a prominent and well-respected doctor named John Hall in June of 1607.

Susanna and John had one child – Elizabeth – which would be the only grandchild that William would know.

Susanna was able to sign her name which has prompted

historians to speculate that William's oldest daughter was literate. She died at the age of 66 in 1649.

In February of 1585, Anne and William would have more children – this time, twins. Named after family friends, Hamnet and Judith would be the last children Anne and William would have. Tragically, Hamnet would die at the age of

11 in 1596, the cause of which is unknown.

His twin sister Judith married Thomas Quiney, a man of dubious character, in February of 1616. Thomas had recently impregnated another woman (who would die during childbirth, along with the baby) which must have been a source of embarrassment for the entire family. Judith died in

1662 at the extraordinary age of 77.

The period between 1585 and 1592 is often referred to as the "lost years" when discussing Shakespeare's biography. Multiple theories have been proposed in which scholars have speculated that the young bard found employment as a teacher, a traveling actor and a household musician.



Figure 9: The home of Shakespeare's daughter – Susanna Shakespeare and her husband, John Hall.

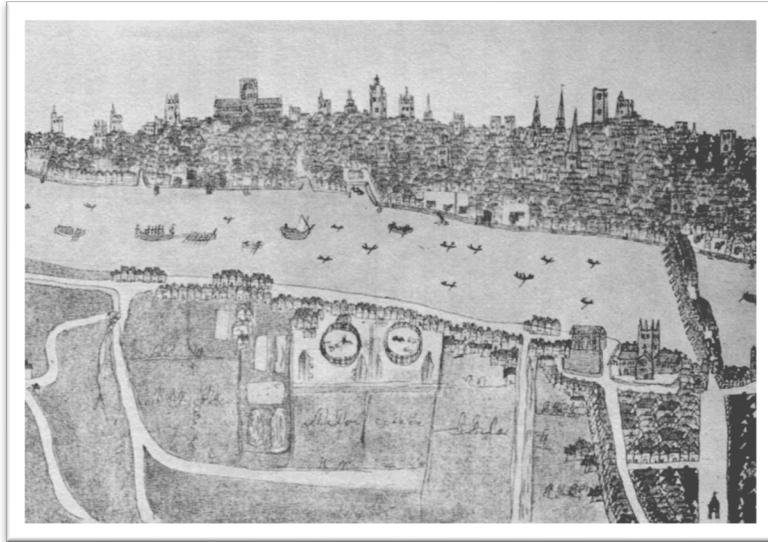


Figure 10: Drawing of London c. 1580

LIFE IN LONDON

Our next sighting of Shakespeare occurs in London, 7 years after the birth of his twins.

In a brief autobiography entitled "Greene's Groats-Worth of Wit" printed in 1592, dramatist Robert Greene singled out several Elizabethan playwrights, including Shakespeare, for criticism. A prominent figure in theatre at the time, Greene labeled Shakespeare an "upstart crow" in the pamphlet.

The resulting controversy was significant enough to warrant a public, printed apology from the publisher to Shakespeare. Such an act on the part of the publisher would seem to bolster the argument that Shakespeare had already established himself in London as a successful actor and respected playwright.

LORD CHAMBERLAIN'S MEN

Between 1592 and 1611, Shakespeare would reside primarily in London, apart from his family in Stratford.

In 1594, Shakespeare joined a theatre company known as

"Lord Chamberlain's Men". The theatre company received patronage from Henry Carey who held the Cabinet position of the Lord Chamberlain – hence, the name of the company.

As the recipients of patronage, the company would have been protected from the 1572 statute against vagabonds and rogues, allowing them to perform their plays throughout the land.

The exclusive rights to perform Shakespeare's plays were retained by Lord Chamberlain's Men, and the profits were split between eight shareholders, of which Shakespeare was one.

Shakespeare made the bulk of his income from his stake in the company and as a result, saw his financial situation improve considerably. In 1597, Shakespeare bought a sizeable home in Stratford which he named New Place.

THE PUBLIC PLAYHOUSES

In the early years of the company, Lord Chamberlain's Men presented most of their productions at an Elizabethan



Figure 11: The reconstructed Globe Theatre in London

playhouse known simply as “The Theatre” which they built on a leased plot of land near London.

Because of the plague, a statute was passed in 1575 which banned actors from the city of London – as such, all playhouses including “The Theatre”, “The Curtain” and “The Rose” were built just outside the city limits. It is believed that “The Theatre” was the second permanent

playhouse to have been built in London.

When negotiations to renew their lease stalled in 1598, Lord Chamberlain’s Men made the decision to completely dismantle “The Theatre” and transport all of the lumber across the Thames where they built the Globe Theatre.

This new theatre would serve as home to Shakespeare's plays and held the distinction of

solely presenting theatre (whereas other Elizabethan theatres would also present other popular forms of entertainment such as bear-baiting).

SUCCESS AS A PLAYWRIGHT

During this period, William’s popularity began to grow and in 1598, a young scholar by the name of Francis Mere wrote that William Shakespeare was without doubt, “the best [writer] of both comedy and

tragedy for the stage.”

Indeed, Shakespeare's company did so well that when King James assumed the throne in 1603, the Lord Chamberlain's company became the recipient of royal patronage and saw its name changed to the King's Men.

At this point, Shakespeare began to focus more on playwriting (although he never gave up acting completely).

His earliest plays consisted primarily of histories and comedies including *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Titus Andronicus*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Richard III*.

The success of these early plays allowed Shakespeare to shift his attention to tragedies including *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *King Lear*.

Towards the end of his career, he began to experiment with more complex themes resulting in several tragi-comedies (also known as "romances") which included *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. In all, he produced no

less than 37 plays, 2 narrative poems and over 150 sonnets.

THE PRIVATE PLAYHOUSES

The immense popularity of Shakespeare's plays allowed the King's Men to present performances at a second theatre known as Blackfriars Theatre beginning in 1609.

Unlike the Globe, Blackfriars was an indoor theatre which

allowed the theatre company to perform its plays during the winter season while the Globe was closed because of the weather.

Although Blackfriars seated considerably less than the Globe Theatre, it generated twice the revenue making it a profitable enterprise for its six shareholders (including Shakespeare).

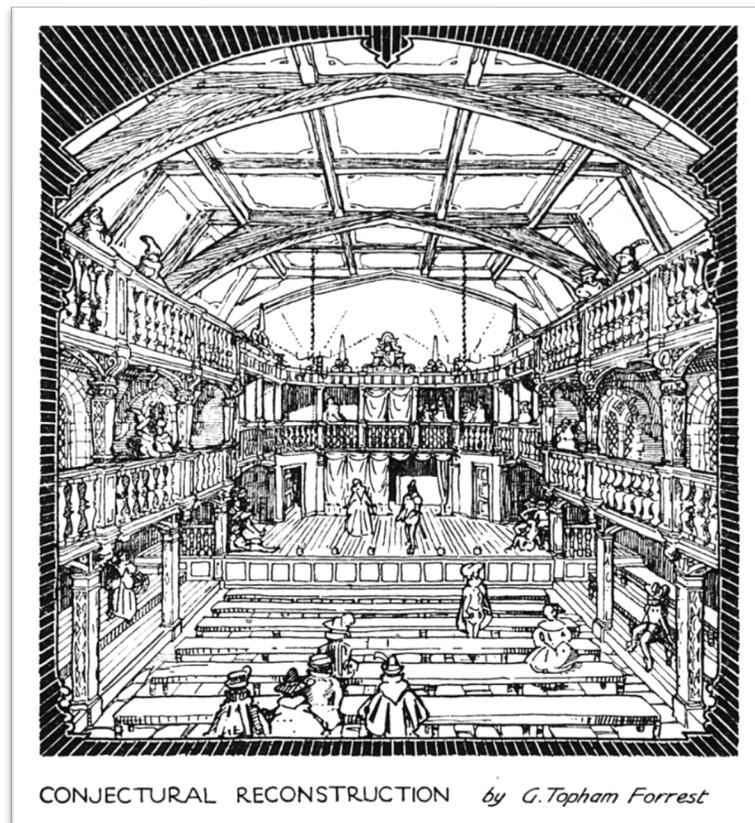


Figure 12: Drawing of Blackfriars Theatre



Figure 13: Church of the Holy Trinity in Stratford-upon-Avon

FINAL YEARS

After 1611, Shakespeare retired to Stratford but probably returned to London in 1613 to help plan the rebuilding of the Globe Theatre after it burned down as a result of cannon fire during a performance of Henry VIII.

He passed away on April 23rd in 1616 in Stratford. His wife died four months later but not before overseeing erection of a monument to her husband in the Church of the Holy Trinity in Stratford.

SHAKESPEARE'S WILL

One popular subject for perpetual debate among Shakespearean scholars involves the Bard's will.

To begin, his final testament contains 3 of his signatures – a seemingly unremarkable point until you consider the fact that there are only 6 surviving signatures by Shakespeare in existence.

Each of the 3 signatures from his will appear shaky (especially when compared to his other surviving signatures) which has led some historians to conclude that Shakespeare was in poor

health during the final months of his life.

Additionally, it appears that Shakespeare rather hastily revised his will just a few months before his death. Most scholars believe William did so to protect his estate from his youngest daughter's husband, Thomas Quiney.

Having been briefly excommunicated for failing to obtain a proper marriage license, Quiney was also convicted for adultery a month after he married Shakespeare's daughter.

As such, it's probable that Shakespeare didn't like Quiney which would explain why he went to extensive lengths in his will to prevent his son-in-law from inheriting anything.

Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of Shakespeare's final testament involves his decision to only leave his wife the "second best bed with the furniture".

He didn't even mention his wife by name which in turn has led historians to speculate that the

relationship between William and Anne was strained (especially when paired with the fact that he chose to live in London, apart from his wife in Stratford, for the majority of his adult life).

THE FIRST FOLIO

William Shakespeare died without ever publishing his plays. Actually, the practice of publishing plays was relatively rare (although not unheard of -

Ben Jonson published a folio of his plays in 1616) so the fact that Shakespeare neglected to publish his wasn't seen as unusual in the early 1600s.

Fortunately, two of his closest friends - Henry Condell and John Heminges – who had been members of his company, collaborated in 1623 to publish 36 of Shakespeare's plays. In publishing "The First Folio", their intent was to present the

plays in their "True Originall" form (partly to commemorate the memory of their dear friend and partly to correct the numerous pirated versions of his plays circulating London).

Indeed, without the efforts of Heminges and Condell, it is no exaggeration to say that Shakespeare might very well have just been a literary footnote instead of the enduring genius beloved today.

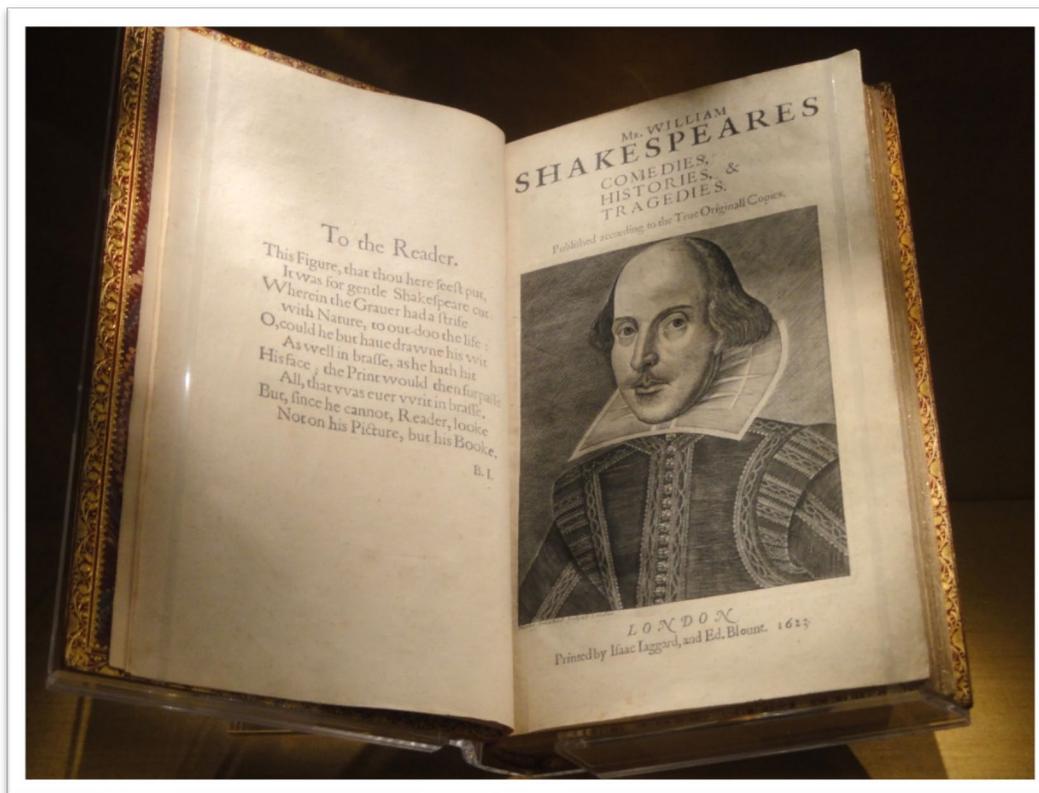


Figure 14: The First Folio

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

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Figure 5: "King Edward VI Grammar School – Church Street, Stratford –upon-Avon"
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