

## Dramatists -Study Material:

### William Shakespeare (1564–1616)

Within the class system of Elizabethan England, William Shakespeare did not seem destined for greatness. He was not born into a family of nobility or significant wealth. He did not continue his formal education at university, nor did he come under the mentorship of a senior artist, nor did he marry into wealth or prestige. His talent as an actor seems to have been modest, since he is not known for starring roles. His success as a playwright depended in part upon royal patronage. Yet in spite of these limitations, Shakespeare is now the most performed and read playwright in the world.

Born to John Shakespeare, a glovemaker and tradesman, and Mary Arden, the daughter of an affluent farmer, William Shakespeare was baptized on April 26, 1564, in Stratford-upon-Avon. At that time, infants were baptized three days after their birth, thus scholars believe that Shakespeare was born on April 23, the same day on which he died at age 52. As the third of eight children, young William grew up in this small town 100 miles northwest of London, far from the cultural and courtly center of England.

Shakespeare attended the local grammar school, King's New School, where the curriculum would have stressed a classical education of Greek mythology, Roman comedy, ancient history, rhetoric, grammar, Latin, and possibly Greek. Throughout his childhood, Shakespeare's father struggled with serious financial debt. Therefore, unlike his fellow playwright Christopher Marlowe, he did not attend university. Rather, in 1582 at age 18, he married Anne Hathaway, a woman eight years his senior and three months pregnant. Their first child, Susanna, was born in 1583, and twins, Hamnet and Judith, came in 1585. In the seven years following their birth, the historical record concerning Shakespeare is incomplete, contradictory, and unreliable; scholars refer to this period as his “lost years.”

In a 1592 pamphlet by Robert Greene, Shakespeare reappears as an “upstart crow” flapping his poetic wings in London. Evidently, it did not take him long to land on the stage. Between 1590 and 1592, Shakespeare's *Henry VI* series, *Richard III*, and *The Comedy of Errors* were performed. When the theaters were closed in 1593 because of the plague, the playwright wrote two narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, and probably began writing his richly textured sonnets. One hundred and fiftyfour of his sonnets have survived, ensuring his reputation as a gifted poet. By 1594, he had also written, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Love's Labor's Lost*.

Having established himself as an actor and playwright, in 1594 Shakespeare became a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Men, one of the most popular acting companies in London. He remained a member of this company for the rest of his career, often playing before the court of Queen Elizabeth I. Shakespeare entered one of his most prolific periods around 1595, writing *Richard II*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. With his newfound success, Shakespeare purchased the second largest home in Stratford in 1597, though he continued to live in London. Two years later, he joined others from the Lord Chamberlain's Men in establishing the polygonal Globe Theatre on the outskirts of London. When King James came to the throne in 1603, he issued a royal license to Shakespeare and his fellow players, organizing them as the King's Men. During King James's reign, Shakespeare wrote many of his most accomplished plays about courtly power, including *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. In 1609 or 1611, Shakespeare's sonnets were published, though he did not live to see the *First Folio* of his plays published in 1623.

In 1616, with his health declining, Shakespeare revised his will. Since his only son Hamnet had died in 1596, Shakespeare left the bulk of his estate to his two daughters, with monetary gifts set aside for his sister, theater partners, friends, and the poor of Stratford. A fascinating detail of his will is that he bequeathed the family's "second best bed" to his wife Anne. He died one month later, on April 23, 1616. To the world, he left a lasting legacy in the form of 38 plays, 154 sonnets, and two narrative poems.

When William Shakespeare died in his birthplace of Stratford-upon-Avon, he was recognized as one of the greatest English playwrights of his era. In the four centuries since, he has come to be seen as not only a great English playwright, but the greatest playwright in the English language. Reflecting upon the achievement of his peer and sometimes rival, Ben Jonson wrote of Shakespeare, "He was not of an age, but for all time."

### **Thomas Hardy 1840 - 1928**

Thomas Hardy was born in Higher Bockhampton, Dorset, England on June 2, 1840, the eldest son of Thomas Hardy and Jemima (Hand) Hardy. His father was a stonemason and builder; his mother passed on her love of reading and books to her son. Hardy had somewhat of an isolated life on the open fields of the region. He grew up living and examining rural life, which figures prominently in many of his novels. His primary school education lasted until he was sixteen, at which time he was sent to an apprenticeship with John Hicks, a local architect.

By 1862, when he was 22, Hardy left for London to work as a draftsman in the office of Arthur Blomfield. While in London, Hardy was influenced by the works of Charles Swinburne, Robert Browning, and Charles Darwin (the

author of *Origin of Species*, 1856). Poor health forced Hardy to return to his native region in 1867, where he worked for Hicks again and for another architect, G.R. Crickmay.

Hardy's education was interrupted by his work as an architect. He had wanted to attend the university and become an Anglican minister, but lack of funds and his declining interest in religion swayed Hardy away from that avocation and more toward a self-study of poetry and writing. Hardy tried his hand at writing when he was 17 and wrote for years while he was a practicing architect. His first novel manuscript, *The Poor Man and the Lady* (1867-68), was rejected by several publishers, but one editor, George Meredith encouraged him, and so Hardy set out to refine his style. A second story, *Desperate Remedies* (1871), was accepted and published. His next novel, *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), demonstrates a more polished Hardy now coming into his own style.

By 1870, Hardy was sent by his employer to begin a restoration project of the St. Juliot Church in Cornwall. Here he met his first wife, Emma Lavinia Gifford, whom Hardy married in 1874. Emma encouraged Hardy to write, and by 1872, Hardy left architecture to devote his time to his literary career.

#### *Literary Work*

When Hardy left his career as architect, he did so with a contract for 11 monthly installments of a tale, *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, in the *Cornhill Magazine*. His reputation as one of England's newer novelists sustained the Hardy family from that time on. The next novel, *Far from the Maddening Crowd* (1874), introduced the Wessex area setting, which also is the setting for *Tess*. The next two novels, *The Return of the Native* (1878) and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), established Hardy as a formidable writer.

Hardy published two more novels, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895), which were his last long fiction works. The last novels challenged the sensibilities of Victorian readers with situations that ruffled many a Victorian feather: immoral sex, murder, illegitimate children, and the unmarried living together. Heated debate and criticism over these two books helped Hardy decide that he would rather write poetry. In fact, so stung was he by the criticism of his works that Hardy did not write another novel.

Hardy wrote short stories, poems, and plays for the rest of his life. Two further volumes of poetry and short stories appeared, *The Dynasts: A Drama of the Napoleonic Wars* (1903-08) and *Winter Words* (1928), a volume of verse. Hardy was quite prolific during this period, writing some 900 poems on a variety of subjects. In 1912, Hardy's wife, Emma, died, ending 20 years of "domestic estrangement." In 1914, Hardy married Florence Emily Dugdale, with whom he lived until his death on January 11, 1928.

Hardy's body was buried at Westminster Abbey in Poet's Corner, while his heart was buried in Stinson, England, near the graves of his ancestors and his first wife, Emma. His second wife was later buried near her husband.

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