EXPLORING

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S

OTHELLO

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AN IRT STUDY GUIDE

The play begins late at night in Venice. Iago, an ensign, tells Roderigo, a Venetian gentleman, of his hatred for Othello, a Moor who is a general in the Venetian army. Othello has passed over Iago for promotion by choosing Cassio as his lieutenant. Iago and Roderigo awaken Brabantio, a Senator, and inform him that his daughter, Desdemona, has eloped with Othello.

Iago rushes ahead to warn Othello of Brabantio's aproach; but as they wait, Cassio arrives with a summons from the Duke of Venice. Brabantio follows them to court.

The Duke is holding an emergency war council with his Senators; among them are Lodovico, Desdemona's cousin, and Gratiano, her uncle. Word has come that the Turkish fleet is headed for the Venetian colony of Cyprus. Othello and the others arrive, and Brabantio accuses Othello of kidnapping his daughter. Othello reveals their marriage, and while Iago goes to fetch Desdemona, Othello describes their courtship. The Duke is moved by Othello's tale, but when Desdemona arrives and confirms her love for Othello, Brabantio disowns his daughter. Returning to state business, the Duke orders Othello to Cyprus. Desdemona makes the unusual request to accompany her husband to the outpost; the Duke consents, and Othello asks Iago to bring along his wife, Emilia, to serve as Desdemona's attendant. Roderigo, who secretly loves Desdemona, despairs; Iago assures him she can be won, and convinces him to sell his possessions and travel to Cyprus. Alone, Iago plots to use jealousy to turn Othello against Cassio.

The action moves to the island of Cyprus, where, in the midst of a tremendous storm, Montano, the current governor, awaits the Turkish fleet. Cassio arrives with the news that Othello is to replace Montano. Next lands Iago's ship with Desdemona, Emilia, and Roderigo. Noting Cassio kiss Desdemona's hand, Iago perfects his plans. Othello's ship arrives, and after greeting Desdemona passionately, he announces that the Turkish fleet has drowned in the storm.

Iago convinces Roderigo that Cassio and Desdemona are lovers; he incites him to confront Cassio that very night. Iago gets Cassio drunk; Cassio and Roderigo quarrel, and Montano, interceding, is wounded by Cassio. Othello is summoned and, angered at being interrupted on what is effectively his wedding night, banishes Cassio from his service. Sobering, Cassio grieves over his folly; Iago suggests he enlist Desdemona's aid.

The next morning, Desdemona promises Cassio she will speak for him to Othello. As Cassio exits, Othello and Iago enter; Iago calls Othello's attention to Cassio's speedy departure. Desdemona pleads Cassio's cause until Othello agrees to see him; but when Othello seeks from Iago assurances of Cassio's fitness, Iago instead plants seeds of jealousy.

Desdemona returns to find Othello in distress; calming him, she wipes his brow with her handkerchief, accidentally dropping it. Emilia gives it to Iago, who tells her to have the embroidery copied. When Othello demands proof that Desdemona is unfaithful, Iago claims he has heard Cassio speaking in his sleep about making love to Desdemona. Iago also mentions the handkerchief—Othello's first gift to Desdemona—and says he saw it in Cassio's possession. Othello vows revenge and names Iago his new lieutenant.

Othello asks Desdemona for the handkerchief, but she refuses to admit losing it. Cassio repeats his request for help, and Desdemona counsels patience.

Cassio encounters Bianca, his mistress; he has found the handkerchief in his room and, admiring the design, gives it to her to have the embroidery copied.

Iago implies to Othello that Cassio has admitted committing adultery with Desdemona; Othello collapses in a nervous seizure, which Iago attributes to epilepsy. Othello recovers, and Iago suggests that Othello hide and listen as Iago speaks with Cassio. Cassio and Iago talk bawdily about Bianca, but the eavesdropping Othello believes the subject is Desdemona. Bianca enters, jealous, and returns the handkerchief to Cassio. Othello, incensed, plans to murder Desdemona, and Iago encourages him.

Lodovico and Gratiano arrive from Venice with letters from the Duke ordering Othello back to Venice and appointing Cassio governor of Cyprus. Again Desdemona speaks favorably of Cassio, and Othello strikes her. Iago tells Lodovico that Othello has changed.

Othello interrogates Emilia about Desdemona; Emilia vouches for Desdemona's fidelity. Confronted by Othello, Desdemona swears she has been faithful, but Othello does not believe her. Iago assures Desdemona that a matter of state is what is upsetting Othello. Roderigo confronts Iago, who convinces him to murder Cassio.

Othello tells Desdemona to go to bed and wait for him. Desdemona sings a melancholy song as Emilia helps her prepare for the night.

Iago and Roderigo attack Cassio in the dark. Cassio wounds Roderigo, while Iago, under cover, wounds Cassio. Othello, hearing Cassio's cries, assumes Iago has killed him. Lodovico and Gratiano arrive on the scene, and Iago, in pretense of avenging Cassio, kills Roderigo. Iago hints that Bianca may be the cause of the fracas, and sends Emilia to tell Othello what has happened.

Othello goes to Desdemona's bedchamber to kill her. He accuses her of adultery; despite her pleas of innocence, he smothers her. Emilia interrupts him, and Desdemona retains consciousness just long enough to proclaim Othello's innocence before she dies. Nonetheless, Othello confesses the murder, claiming just cause. When he reveals Iago's role in exposing Desdemona's supposed infidelity, Emilia realizes Iago has been lying. She calls for help, and Montano, Gratiano, and Iago arrive. When Othello speaks of the handkerchief, Emilia reveals she was the one who gave it to Iago. Othello thrusts at Iago; Iago escapes, killing Emilia. Othello mourns. The others return, with Iago prisoner, and the full extent of Iago's treachery is revealed. Othello kills himself with a hidden dagger. Lodovico promises Iago terrible punishment. ★

themes to consider

DUALITY

Othello is a play of strong dualities, opposites which co-exist. The characters in the play do not explore the ambiguous, gray areas of life; they tend to divide things into black and white—beginning with the title character. Othello is a black man living in a white man's world. Historically, the color black has often been associated with evil, while the color white has often been associated with good—yet in this play, the black Othello is the hero, while the white Iago is the villain.

The play inhabits a world in which it is difficult to know what is truth and what is a lie. A world where seeming friends may in fact be dire enemies. A world where acts of honor may destroy the innocent. Other elements of this duality are explored more fully below. As you watch the play, watch for these—and other—fascinating opposites.

WHO CAN YOU TRUST?

In the play *Othello*, Iago weaves a web of innuendo and suggestion to entrap and confuse Othello. Likewise, Shakespeare, in writing *Othello*, carefully doles out bits and pieces of information in such a manner that the audience can easily be misled. And again it is Iago who often feeds us information—which may or may not be true.

For example, when Othello falls into a trance, Iago claims it is an epileptic seizure—and that it has happened before. Should we believe this diagnosis? It is Iago who describes Bianca as a whore, although we see nothing that necessarily proves that assertion.

The Othello we meet in the second scene of the play is completely unlike the Othello described in the first scene of the play. In the third scene, the Senators receive letters about the Turkish fleet which contradict each other. Throughout the play, Shakespeare warns us not to believe everything we hear.

TIME

The concept of time is not always what it seems to be in *Othello*. On the surface, the story seems to happen very quickly. The action in Venice plays almost in real time—less than an hour from the time Brabantio is awakened to the end of the Senate meeting. In Cyprus, it seems that barely 24 hours pass: the ships arrive late in the day; Cassio is demoted late that night; Iago arouses Othello's jealousy the next morning; Lodovico arrives that afternoon; and by late that night the play is ended.

Yet a closer examination reveals discrepancies in this schedule. More than one character makes comments that suggest they have been in Cyprus for quite some time. Bianca berates Cassio for avoiding her for a week. Emilia notes that Iago has asked her to steal Desdemona's handkerchief "times." And certainly it would take days, if not weeks, for the news of the Turks' defeat to reach Venice and for Lodovico to set sail to Cyprus. This "double-time" scheme has fascinated scholars for centuries. Perhaps Shakespeare wished to compress the story to heighten the drama, with little care for the loss of logic. Perhaps he played with the concept of time to suggest the gradual dissolution of Othello's reason. Perhaps he wanted certain elements of the play itself to be as untrustworthy as Iago. Whatever his reasoning, in *Othello* Shakespeare expands and contracts both the clock and the calendar to suit his own needs.

RACISM—HATRED OF "THE OTHER"

Othello is a Moor in Venice—a black man in a world of white men. At the time Shakespeare wrote the play, Queen Elizabeth was negotiating with the Moors to fight against the Spanish. Moorish ambassadors commanded a certain amount of respect in London. But when the black population grew uncomfortably large, white Englishmen had no qualms about rounding them up and shipping them off—just as they did Jews and other minorities.

Even though Othello is a highly respected and honored public figure, he is not immune to the common racial prejudices of Shakespeare's day. A person who is thwarted in his desires often lashes out at those who are perceived to be different—"the other." Angered at being passed over for promotion, Iago not only disparages Othello's color, he notes that Cassio is a Florentine—an out-of-towner. Other characters make assumptions about Othello based on racial stereotypes—assumptions which turn out to be false. Once again, Shakesepeare warns us not to accept things at face value.

RELATIONSHIPS

Unlike other Shakespearean tragedies, whose central issue is often concerned with the royal line of succession—who will be the next king?—*Othello* focuses on a complex web of interpersonal relationships. The play begins with an elopement and an angry father. We're in the midst of a national emergency—the invasion of the Turkish fleet—the Venetian Senate convenes and deals first with this family matter before returning to affairs of state.

That Desdemona accompanies her husband literally to the front lines of battle is extraordinary, to say the least. Remember, Cyprus is a frontier outpost—an army garrison. It is a fortress filled with soldiers—men—and the presence of women such as Desdemona and Emilia must be unusual in the extreme. It is not surprising that tensions arise around these two women who are, frankly, in a place where they don't belong.

Remember, also, that with the Turkish fleet drowned in the storm, the war is over even before it begins. Now Cyprus is a fort full of soldiers primed for battle—with nothing to do. Again, it is not surprising that trouble breeds in such a ripe atmosphere. The plot of *Othello* becomes a succession of secret conversations, misunderstandings, innuendos—trifles as seemingly insignificant as who gives a handkerchief to whom. Yet from these trifles—which are not matters for a king or a prince, but rather the stuff of everyday life—Shakespeare creates a powerful and affecting tragedy. ★

shakespeare's theatre

Shakespeare originally wrote his plays to be performed in the Globe Theatre, a building which, in its shape and design, functioned as a metaphor—a map, if you will, of the Elizabethan concepts of society, civilization, and the universe. The name of the theatre itself—the Globe—suggested that the events which were portrayed on its stage were symbolic of events which happened in the world. The building's shape, an octagon, suggested the round shape of the world itself—a roundness which had only been discovered one hundred years before.

(Shakespeare frequently toys with the name of the Globe in his plays. For example, in *Othello*, at the height of the play's tragic climax, Othello says:

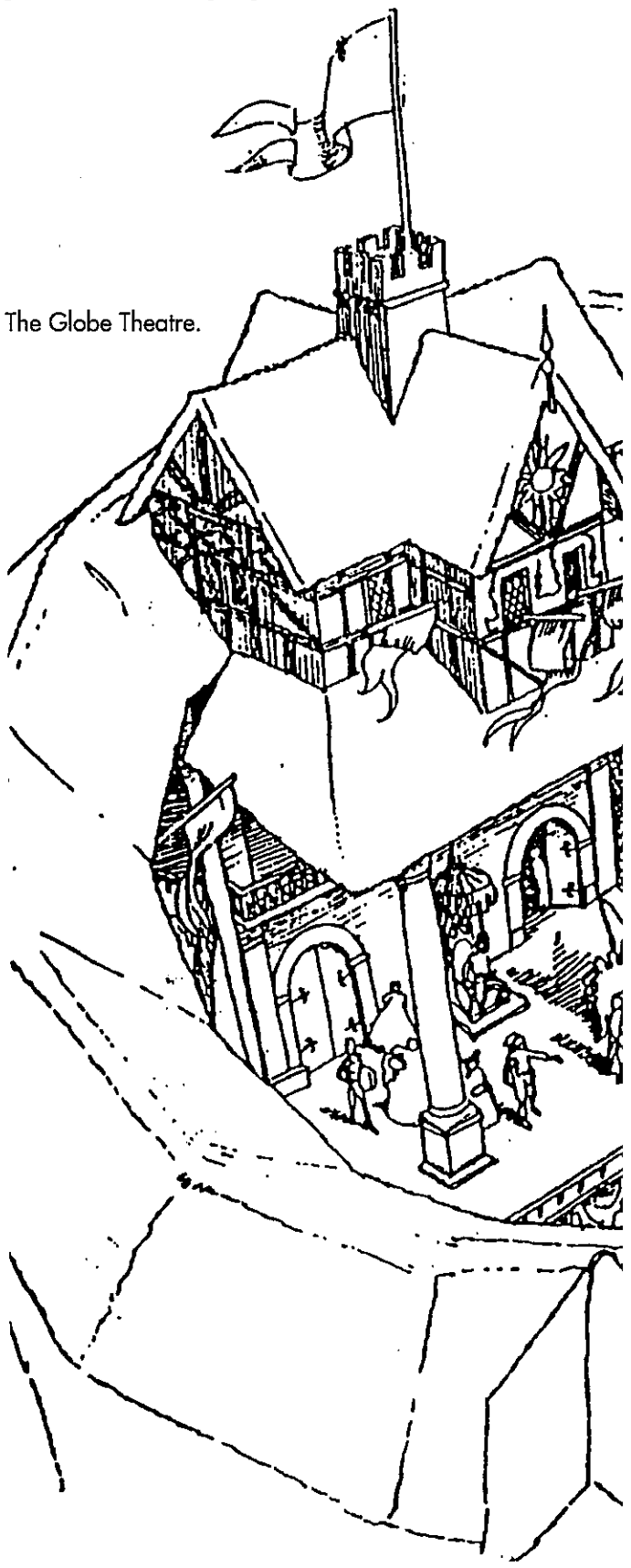
> *Methinks, it should be now a huge Eclipse*
> *Of Sun and Moon, and that th'affrighted Globe*
> *Should yawn at Alteration.*

Literally he means that the earth should quake or "yawn" (open wide) at such terrible deeds. But he also refers to the audience of "th'affrighted Globe," gasping in horror at the tragedy they have just witnessed.)

Inside the theatre, the stage represented the stage on which world events are enacted. Trap doors in the stage floor could open for demons rising from Hell—or descending thereto. The stage roof was held up by two massive columns known as the Pillars of Hercules. High above the stage was a ceiling painted with the stars of the Zodiac—the heavens. And tucked under that ceiling was a small balcony where the theatre's musicians played "the Music of the Spheres."

The audience surrounding the stage was likewise arranged to reflect society. Standing around the stage itself, in an area known as the Pit, were the groundlings—those of the lowest classes who paid the least for admittance. Three surrounding levels of balconies arose above them, with correspondingly rising admission prices—so that Elizabethan society, from top to bottom, was clearly divided and arranged for all to see in the Globe Theatre.

Thus an audience member at the Globe could not help but feel his place in the world order, and as he watched the play he could not help but see the action on the stage as emblematic of life in the world at large. For example, in *King Lear*, when Lear enters at the end of the playing carrying the body of his dead daughter, we see not only a sad image of a bereft father, we see an archetypal image of tragedy itself. As you watch *Othello*, look for those moments which link the world of the play to the world at large—not only Shakespeare's world, but the world we live in today. ★



The Globe Theatre.

Venice & Cyprus

In Shakespeare's day, the Italian city-state of Venice was seen as the epitome of an ordered, rational republic. Its government, with a ruling Duke and a body of Senators, was similar to England's government of Queen and Parliament. The beauty of Venice's architecture and the romance of its canals were unequalled in the world. In many ways, proud England saw Venice as a "sister"—an equal in the world.

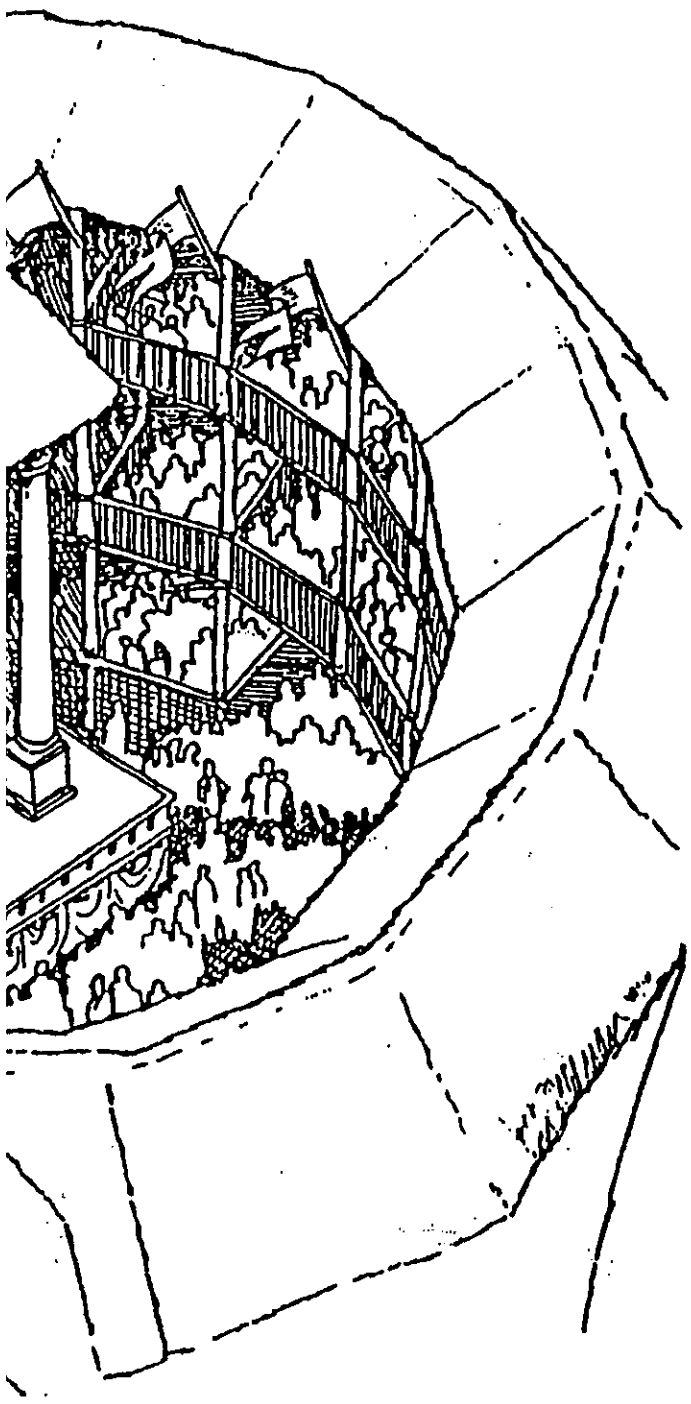
But there were differences. England was a Protestant nation, while Venice was Catholic. (The loss of the Turkish fleet in *Othello* would have reminded London audiences of their defeat of the [Catholic] Spanish Armada less than twenty years earlier.) Venice also had a reputation as a pleasure center—rather like Las Vegas today. There was much gambling. Prostitution was condoned on the theory that it protected the virginity of the daughters of wealth. Venetian businessmen had a reputation for ruthless greed.

For centuries, Cyprus was the last outpost of western civilization, important both strategically and symbolically for its protection of trade routes. Beyond Cyprus to the east was the Turkish Empire. At the time *Othello* was written—just after 1600—white, Christian, Europe defined itself in opposition to the brown, Moslem, Turkish Empire. The Turks were hated and feared in England. The Turkish army had a reputation for fierceness, cruelty, and valor, and they were felt as a genuine threat should there be a shift in the balance of power.

In 1571, after years of Venetian rule, Cyprus fell to the Turks. Shakespeare's audience, watching *Othello*, would have seen the play—even though it is fictional—in the context of that recent historic event (much as an audience today would view a fictional story set during the fall of Saigon). The tragic end of Othello—governor of Cyprus—would have repercussions beyond its affect on the lives of the characters in the play. Due to the strategic importance of Cyprus and the precariousness of peace, these are events which would have global implications. ★

Desdemona in her traveling clothes; Othello in uniform. Costume renderings by Ann Sheffield.

The IRT Production



SCENERY

Scenic designer Russell Metheny and director Scott Wentworth had two goals for this production. First, obviously, they wanted to design a space for the play *Othello*. But they also wanted to honor the Shakespearean tradition with a design which, at least at first glance, would appear to be appropriate for any Shakespeare play, just as the Globe, without significant scenic alteration, was home to all of Shakepeare's plays originally.

The result is essentially a large, empty wooden box. There are doors in the walls which can be opened and shut during the Venice scenes, revealing tiny glimpses of dark alleyways and hidden corridors. When the action moves to Cyprus, portions of the walls fold into themselves, revealing vast, open expanses of white canvas, representing the sea and sky.

Within this wooden box, a series of 24 suspended lamps move up and down to create different environments and effects. The lamps are mechanically raised and lowered by an ingenious system (developed by the IRT Scene Shop) using the motors from 24 power drills. The lamps can be moved together or independently, depending on the desired affect.

LIGHTING

Obviously, the hanging lamps are an important part of designer Ann Wrightson's lighting for *Othello*. Furthermore, the lighting design reflects the theme of duality which runs throughout the play and the production. The scenes in Venice take place at night, and lighting is characterized by shafts and pools of light surrounded by darkness, suggesting the secret nature of events which transpire in the night. In contrast, once the storm has passed in Cyprus, the lighting suggests the long, hot days on a frontier outpost with no escape from the relentless sun. The play returns to night and darkness for its tragic conclusion.

COSTUMES

Director Scott Wentworth and costume designer Ann Sheffield tried to fulfill two opposing mandates in *Othello*. On the one hand, they wanted the clothes to reflect a contemporary sensibility, to avoid putting a distance between the audience and the characters. On the other hand, they wanted to maintain a certain mythic, historical quality, on the grounds that the heroic character of Othello needs that kind of environment in which to fully flourish.

The result is an amalgamation of styles from many eras. At first glance, the clothes seem to have a typical Elizabethan silhouette. But closer examination, particularly of the women's clothing, reveals contemporary details inspired by the latest fashion magazines: wrap-around skirts with waistbands that roll and tie; corsets worn outside rather than inside; oversized cuffs which hang down to the fingertips.

Designing the men's clothing was further complicated by the fact that most of the men in the play are soldiers, a fact which to contemporary audiences suggests uniforms. But the military uniform is a concept which wasn't yet invented in Shakespeare's time. So Ms. Sheffield has created a uniform consisting of knee boots and jodhpurs worn with a garment that combines elements of a typical Elizabethan doublet with a traditional West Point military jacket. Othello, being a general, has a more elaborate uniform, with gold braid and a sash. The soldiers coats are similar to those of the eighteenth century. The Venetian Senators wear robes reminiscent of nineteenth-century judicial robes.

Director Wentworth notes, "By giving the clothing a kind of historicism we hope to allow the play to speak to its larger, more mythical themes. But by overlaying that with a contemporary consciousness we hope the audience will be able to recognize subtleties that would be impenetrable with a purely historic wardrobe." ★

shakespeare

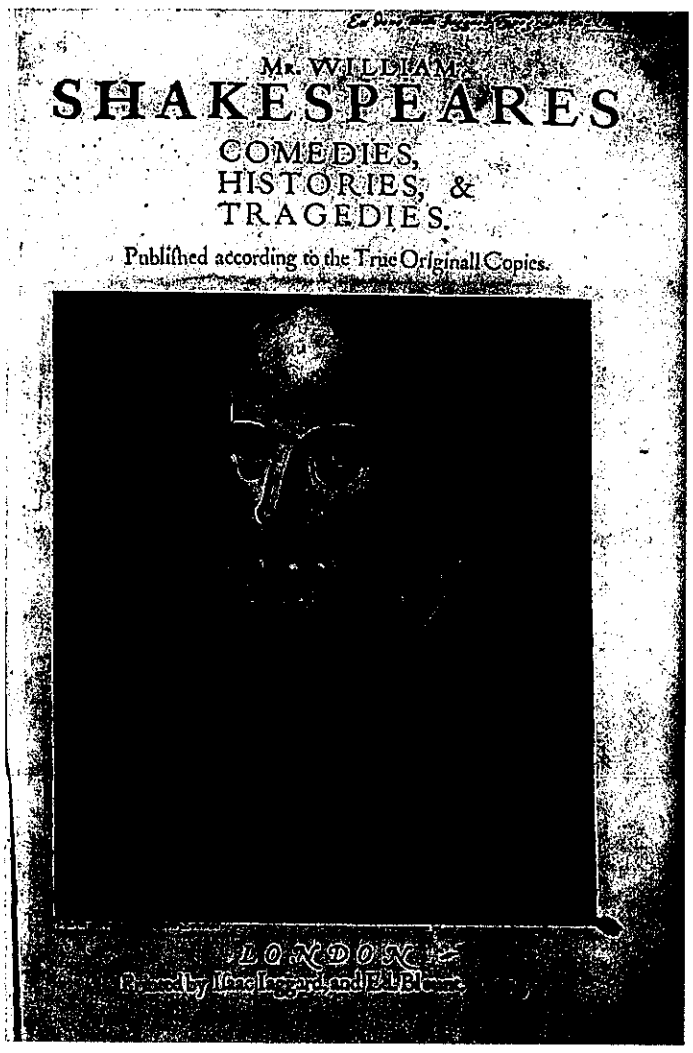
Although William Shakespeare is generally considered the greatest dramatist in the English language, little is known of a factual nature about his life. A handful of legal documents verify his existence, but much of Shakespeare's biography has been creatively reconstructed from general knowledge about the historic period and life in that time.

He was baptized in the Church of England at Stratford-upon-Avon, a Warwickshire market town, on April 26, 1564. This fact leads us to believe that he was born on April 23, because it was the custom in those days to baptize children about three days after their birth. His father, John, was a glove maker who became High Bailiff of Stratford, a position very much like our mayor. His mother, Mary Arden Shakespeare, was the eldest daughter of a wealthy landowner. William, with his three younger brothers and two younger sisters, grew up in a middle-class family of good local repute.

As the son of a leading citizen and public official, Shakespeare would have been expected to go to school as soon as he had learned to read and write. The Stratford grammar school, one of the town's prized institutions, was excellent by comparison to similar schools in bigger towns. School was in session in summer and winter, and students attended for nine hours a day. The curriculum was limited, consisting almost entirely of Latin: grammar, reading, writing, and recitation. It is possible that as an older student, Shakespeare might have had the opportunity to act out some of the classical plays written in Latin as part of a school assignment.

By the time Shakespeare was a youth, many traveling theatre companies of significance had visited Stratford, so it is fair to guess that Shakespeare had seen some of them and admired their art. One of the leading companies was the Earl of Leicester's Men (named after their patron), led by James Burbage, who built the first permanent theatre structure in London when Shakespeare was twelve. Burbage's son Richard was destined to become Shakespeare's future colleague and friend. If one side of young Shakespeare's life was dominated by the stern discipline of school and religious morality, the other suggests the color and enthusiasm of the medieval world. From this contrast must have come eventually the impulse that sent Shakespeare to London and theatrical fame.

The next fact that exists regarding Shakespeare's life seems to suggest that his path to London was not a direct one: a document dated November 27, 1582, states that at age 18, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, who was eight years his senior. Six months later, Shakespeare's eldest child, Susanna, was born. Two years later he became the father of twins, Hamnet and Judith. Little is known of Shakespeare's life at this time. It is clear that by the early 1590s, however, Shakespeare was very much a part of the theatrical scene in London, although we know nothing of the circumstances by which he left Stratford



and his family to become an actor and playwright in the city. In 1594 Shakespeare was established at the center of theatrical activity, for he is recorded as a shareholder, along with Richard Burbage, in the famed Globe Theatre, located on the south bank of the Thames, across from the Tower of London.

Shakespeare wrote 37 plays, several narrative poems, and over 150 sonnets in the next fifteen years. By the turn of the century he was the most popular playwright in London, and his company enjoyed a unique advantage in the city's highly competitive theatrical world. He seems to have attained some degree of wealth and prestige, for he was granted a coat of arms, thus officially making him a gentleman, and he bought sizeable pieces of real estate in and around Stratford with his earnings. His plays also exhibit not only a fine sense of poetry and stagecraft, but an excellent awareness of the political and literary atmosphere in which he lived. These were tempestuous times socially and politically, and Shakespeare used his plays metaphorically to suggest how order could be made out of chaos in a changing society.

By 1604 his company was named the King's Men, for they had attracted the favorable attention of the new monarch, King James I. Their fortunes continued to rise as their plays drew well at the Globe, and the number of command performances at Court doubled and tripled. It may be significant that most of Shakespeare's great tragedies—*Othello, Hamlet, King Lear, Macbeth*—were written within the first five years of the new century. It suffices to say that within a single decade, Shakespeare created a wealth of drama, some of it comic, some tragic, such as the world has never seen.

Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616—his 52nd birthday—and is buried in the church chancel in Stratford. The epitaph carved on his gravestone, perhaps written by Shakespeare himself, reads:

Good friend for Jesus sake forbear,
To dig the dust enclosed here!
Blest be the man that spares these stones,
And curst be he that moves my bones.

The greatest testament to Shakespeare's genius occurred in 1623, when two of his fellow actors, John Heminge and Henry Condell, cooperated with a London printer in publishing a collected edition of Shakespeare's plays. This kind of publication was rare in its day, as plays were valued for their commercial appeal on the stage, with little thought of them as literature to be preserved. It is safe to say that Heminge and Condell reconstructed some of the texts from memory or from a stage manager's promptbook. In any case the first Folio, as this first collection has come to be called, is a document of great historic and literary importance, for it preserved for posterity some of the greatest writing in the English language, allowing us to study and perform Shakespeare's plays over 400 years later and for generations to come. ★