

the traveling performers who stopped and performed in Stratford on their way to London. At the age of eighteen or nineteen, he is believed to have been acting in plays in London. Friends in London helped him financially and professionally. Soon, he was well established in social and theatrical circles. By 1594, he was part owner and principal playwright of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, one of the most successful theater companies in London.

In 1599, the company built the famous Globe theater, where most of Shakespeare's plays were performed. When James I became king in 1603, following the death of Elizabeth I, he took control of the Lord Chamberlain's Men and renamed the company the King's Men. A major stockholder in the company, Shakespeare continued to write for and act with this company.

Parting Is Such Sweet Sorrow

In about 1610, Shakespeare retired to Stratford, a prosperous middle-class man, having profited from his share in a successful theater company. He lived in the second-largest house in Stratford, invested in grain and farmland, and continued to write plays.

Shakespeare wrote his will on March 25, 1616. He left the bulk of his property to his oldest daughter, Susanna, and a smaller sum to his other daughter, Judith. (Hamnet had died in 1596.) According to the laws of the time, his widow automatically

from *Shakespeare Alive!*

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Joseph Papp, the founder and producer of the New York Shakespeare festival, devoted his life to making Shakespeare accessible to all. In Shakespeare Alive! he re-creates the England in which Shakespeare lived and worked.

Pounds of flesh in Venice; ambitious king-killers in Scotland; star-crossed lovers in Verona; daughterly ingratitude in ancient Britain; whimsical courtships in the Forest of Arden; sultry love and stern politics in ancient Egypt—Shakespeare's imagination appears to have cornered the market on exciting, inventive plot making. It seems there's no story he hasn't thought of. But how could all of these intriguing plots and stirring adventures possibly come from a single brain?

The answer is simple—they didn't. When it came to plots, Shakespeare was a borrower, not an inventor. It is astonishing to realize that not a single one of the stories in his plays was his own creation. Rather than growing his plots himself, he plucked them from the plentiful orchards of other authors.

Yet before we start suspecting Shakespeare of plagiarism, we'd better take a look at what everyone else was doing in the literary world. Although this business of outright lifting from other writers' work might seem dubious to us, it wasn't unusual in Shakespeare's time. Without copyright laws to protect an author's works, the business of writing and publishing was truly a "free trade" affair, and everyone's works were saleable commodities. Furthermore, the authors' originality just wasn't an issue; in fact, they were openly encouraged to imitate certain writing styles and literary models, especially, but not exclusively, the classical ones. The upshot of all this was that sixteenth-century authors and playwrights regularly raided both their predecessors and their colleagues, without giving it a second thought; one contemporary of Shakespeare's boasts proudly, "I have so written, as I have read."

In his far-flung borrowing, then, Shakespeare was a product of his times; and yet in this, as in so much else, he flew high above his contemporaries. Shakespeare's ultimate source was the broad spirit of the age, which he drew on in his own unique fashion.

received a lifetime income from one third of his estate. Although Susanna and Judith both had children, none lived to have children of their own. For this reason, Shakespeare has no living descendants. On April 23 (his birthday, if scholars are correct), 1616, Shakespeare died.