

# SHAKESPEARE AND HIS WORLD

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## Acting and Writing

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Shakespeare is still in his early twenties. He has three young children, the family business is not going well, his father is struggling to pay off his debts, and hiding from the law. What's he going to do? Well, like any young man, he's going to go to London to seek his fortune. There are a lot of later stories about Shakespeare's so-called 'lost' years. We don't know precisely where he was in the mid- to late-1580s between the birth of the twins and his definite appearance in the London theatre world.

There is one bit of evidence that Shakespeare was in London in 1588, conducting some legal and financial business on behalf of the family. So that's as good a date as any to imagine that it was the moment when he decided to try to make his way in the new profession of the theatre – and professional theatre was something new at the time, as we'll see next week.

By the early 1590s, we know for sure that Shakespeare has become an actor. He's working very closely with a group of other actors. They move between a number of different companies, but it's rapidly apparent that the leading figure among them is this man, Richard Burbage. Burbage would go on to become Shakespeare's closest friend and the man for whom he wrote all the great parts.

You're looking here at a copy held in the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford-upon-Avon, of an original portrait of Burbage that is now in the Dulwich Picture Gallery in London. This, then, is the original Hamlet, the original King Lear, the original Romeo. It's very important that Shakespeare knew his actors, worked closely for them, wrote particular parts for particular actors.

Shakespeare and those actors, such as Burbage, were just establishing themselves as some of the leading players in the early 1590s when disaster struck. There was a major outbreak of plague, and the theatres had to be closed. (The point of this was that, of course, public places with large crowds in close proximity to each other were very dangerous from the point of view of the spread of infection. So whenever a bad outbreak of plague hit London, immediately the theatres were closed.) That was a problem for the actors. What they had to do was get out on the road, tour in the provinces, and the takings were always much poorer there than they were in the city with its huge population.

It seems, though, that in 1593 and 94 while various acting companies were out in the country, Shakespeare didn't go with them. It would seem that just as he was establishing himself as a playwright, he decided on an alternative, or an additional course, for his writing: He decided to write poetry.

In a way, that was an easier option because writing poetry, you don't have to rely on the whole apparatus of a theatre, an acting company, a production process – but it was not easy to get poetry published at the time. The publishing industry was really beginning to take off, but Shakespeare needed contacts, and for this, he had a piece of good fortune: One of the other boys from his school, the Stratford-upon-Avon Grammar School, was called Richard Field. Field had gone to London and established himself as an apprentice to a printer, a man called Thomas Vautrollier. He was one of the leading printers of the day, printed huge books, classical texts, literary texts, history books, all sorts of things. Field worked for him, quickly proved himself, and soon was able to set up his own printing business.

And it was to Field that Shakespeare went when he wanted to get his first poem published. The poem is called 'Venus and Adonis'. It's based on one of the stories that Shakespeare read in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the book that so inspired him throughout his career.

He first encountered Ovid in the grammar school. He then read the *Metamorphoses* and found the story of Adonis (a beautiful boy who loves hunting and field sports, but is not very interested in girls) and Venus (the goddess of love) an older woman. Venus falls for Adonis, tries to seduce him, he resists. She becomes angry. He's punished. The punishment takes the form of him being torn apart by a boar. An irony in view of him being a hunter, himself.

Venus immediately shows great remorse at having cursed Adonis. And the poem ends where she finds a drop of his blood, and it's transformed into a flower as a kind of memory of his beauty. Many of Ovid's stories have this pattern of the transformation, the metamorphosis, of a human into something natural, part of the natural world.