

Engraving of William Shakespeare by Martin Droeshout from the first folio edition of plays, 1623

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William Shakespeare

What can we find out
about his life?

Introduction

Lesson at a Glance

Suitable For: KS1-3

Time Period:

Early Modern 1485-1750

Curriculum Link:

The lives of significant people who have contributed to national and international achievements.

Enquiry Questions:

What can we find out about William Shakespeare's life?

Resources needed:

Printed sources

William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare is often thought of as one of the greatest writers in the English language. His plays have been translated into every major language, and are performed more often than any other playwright. Shakespeare's writing also affected the way the English language evolved, and several words and phrases, such as 'all's well that ends well', 'with bated breath' and 'a foregone conclusion' have moved into everyday use.

This lesson gives you the chance to look at primary sources concerning Shakespeare, including his will and information about his taxes.

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Background

William Shakespeare, also known as the 'Bard', was born in Stratford-upon-Avon on April 23rd 1564. It is thought he married his wife, Anne Hathaway, in 1582, although we have no specific marriage certificate. He pursued a career as an actor, poet and dramatist in London. His now famous plays were performed widely during his lifetime, often at the purpose-built Globe Theatre in London on the south bank of the Thames. The first folio was published in 1623, with 154 sonnets, 37 plays, and 2 long poems. It is suggested that his friends put it together in case others tried to copy Shakespeare's work and claim it as their own. Since then, he has become internationally renowned as the world's greatest ever playwright.

On March 25th 1616, William Shakespeare made his will, signed 'by me, William Shakspeare'. He died on April 25th that same year. Some people believe that he caught a fever at a 'merry party' thrown by Ben Jonson. Others prefer to say that no cause of death was officially recorded.

Shakespeare's will itself is a matter of debate. The last will and testament helps us to learn about Shakespeare at the end of his life, providing us with minute details about his final wishes. The source evidence in this lesson shows that he was a man of considerable wealth by the time he died, and that most of it was left to his eldest daughter, Susannah Hall. The will also provides us with one of only six samples of his signature. The issue of leaving his 'second best bed' appears insulting and mean to us today. Some experts explain that the 'second best bed' was actually the bed in which William and his wife Anne would have slept, as the best bed would have been kept for guests only. Others describe this as a direct insult to his wife, yet there are also suggestions that leaving a bed to your wife was actually a magnificent gift, as all the valuable bed linen and fine materials would be included. Finally it has also been proposed that a wife would always get the second best things, with the best reserved for a son or daughter.

Teacher's notes

This lesson provides pupils with evidence about Shakespeare that differs from the traditional 'greatest playwright of all time' material that many will be used to. Useful for students studying life in Tudor times both from a History and English perspective, this lesson helps pupils examine Shakespeare as a person rather than a world famous writer. The material encourages pupils to challenge traditional expectations of Shakespeare. By investigating tax records together with his last will and testament, pupils are able to identify how Shakespeare avoided paying his tax and to develop their own theories about his final wishes. Clearly providing excellent cross-curriculum links with English and Drama studies, this lesson is invaluable to those studying Shakespearian times.

This lesson can form part of history studies relating to Tudor and Elizabethan times. As part of the National Curriculum requirements for History, this lesson offers breadth of study coverage for Britain 1500-1750 (9), specifically social changes. This lesson could also be used as part of the KS3 English curriculum as an introduction to Shakespeare

Sources

Source 1 : PROB 1/4

Source 2 : E 179/146/354

Source 3 : E 179/146/369

Source 4 : E 372/455

Tasks

Look at Source 1

1. Take a look at these extracts from Shakespeare's will, 1616.
 - a) Write down what Shakespeare's bequests were to the following people
 - Susannah (eldest daughter)
 - Judith (second daughter)
 - Joan Hart (sister)
 - Joan's three sons (nephews)
 - Elizabeth Hall (granddaughter)
 - The poor of Stratford
 - Mr Thomas Combe (friend's nephew)
 - b) Who, in your opinion, is missing from the list above?
 - c) Who is put in charge of the will (the executor)?
 - d) What does Shakespeare leave to his wife?
 - e) Is there anything to suggest even this bequest is an afterthought?
 - f) Many experts suggest that this is in no way an insult -
 - g) suggest three alternative explanations for Shakespeare's gift.

Look at Source 2

2. This is an extract from a certificate made by the tax commissioners showing a list of people living in St. Helen's Bishopsgate, who had not paid their tax in November 1597 (this area of London was very close to Shoreditch where the Lord Chamberlain's company of actors performed).
- How much are Shakespeare's goods valued at?
 - How much tax does Shakespeare owe?
 - This source shows 'defaulters' - what do you think this means?
 - What has happened to Shakespeare? Why hasn't he paid his tax?

Look at Source 3

3. This is An extract from a list made by the tax commissioners of people living in St. Helen's Bishopsgate, who had not paid their tax in October 1598 (this area of London was very close to Shoreditch where the Lord Chamberlain's company of actors performed).
- What is the difference in time between Source 2 and Source 3?
 - How much tax does Shakespeare now owe?

Look at Source 4

4. This entry (in Latin) is in the main account of the Exchequer (Pipe Roll) of 1599-1600, and shows details of what Shakespeare has owed for tax since 1597 when he was last known to have lived in St. Helen's, Bishopsgate - this area was very close to Shoreditch where the Lord Chamberlain's company of actors performed.
- The money owed by Shakespeare is now the 'business of' whom?
 - What does this evidence suggest?
 - What do you think Shakespeare has been up to between 1597 and 1599?

Look again at Sources 1-4

5. In 1561, Shakespeare's grandfather left a personal estate of £83 7s 6d. looking at the bequests in his will, what does this suggest about William Shakespeare's success? What do you think happened to his finances throughout his life?

Source One: Excerpts from Shakespeare's Will (PROB 1/4)

I have my son John Shakespeare my eldest son my wife my daughter Elizabeth my daughter Susanna

And I do will & devise unto my first wife Elizabeth my daughter Elizabeth my daughter Susanna

unto my first wife Elizabeth my daughter Elizabeth my daughter Susanna

I have my wife my daughter Elizabeth my daughter Susanna

my daughter Elizabeth my daughter Susanna

my daughter Elizabeth my daughter Susanna

My first wife Elizabeth my daughter Elizabeth my daughter Susanna

Source One: Transcript of Excerpts from Shakespeare's Will in original language (PROB 1/4)

'.....Item I Gyve & bequeath unto my sonne in L[aw] Daughter Judyth One Hundred & ffyftie poundes of lawfull English money.....

.....Item I gyve and bequeath unto my saied sister Jone XXli & all my wearing Apparrell to be paied and delivered within one yeare after my deceas And I doe will & devise unto her the house with thappurtenances in Stratford wherein she dwelleth for her naturall lief.....

.....unto her three sonnes William Harte (name omitted) Hart & Michaell Harte ffyve poundes A peece.....

.....Item I gyve & bequeath unto her the saied Elizabeth Hall All my Plate (except my brod silver & gilt bole) that I now have att the date of this my will Item I gyve & bequeath unto the Poore of Stratford aforesaid tenn poundes to Mr Thomas Combe my Sword.....

.....Item I Gyve Will bequeth & devise unto my Daughter Susanna Hall for better enabling of her to performe this my will & towards the performans thereof All that Capitall Messuage or tenemente with thappurtenances in Stratford aforesaid called the newe place wherein I nowe dwell & two messuages or tenementes with thappurtenances scitua lyeing & being in Henley Streete within the borough of Stratford aforesaid And all my barnes stables Orchardes gardens landes tenementes & hereditaments whatsoever scitua lyeing & being or to be had Receyved perceyved or taken within the townes Hamlettes villages Fieldes & groundes of Stratford upon Avon Oldstratford Bushopton & Welcombe or in anie of them in the saied countie of warrwick And alsoe All that Messuage or tenemente with thappurtenances wherein one John Robinson dwelleth scitua lyeing & being in the blackfriers in London nere the Wardrobe & all other my landes tenementes & hereditamentes whatsoever.....

.....Item I gyve unto my wiefe my second best bed with the furniture Item I gyve & bequeath to my saied daughter Judith my broad silver gilt bowl. All the Rest of my goodes Chattel[s] Leases plate Jewels & household stufte whatsoever after dettes and Legasies paied & my funerall expences discharged I gyve devise & bequeath to my Sonne in Lawe John Hall gent & my daughter Susanna his wief whom I ordaine & make executors of this my Last will & testament.....'

{signed}By me William Shakspeare

Source One: Transcript of Excerpts from Shakespeare's Will in modern language (PROB 1/4)

....I leave one hundred and fifty pounds of legal English money to my son-in-law (deleted in will) daughter Judith....

....I leave to my sister, Joan, 20 pounds and all my clothes, which she should receive by the end of the first year after my death. I also give her the house in Stratford and everything belonging to it, for her to live in for the rest of her life....

....I leave to each of her three sons, William Harte, (first name is missing) Hart & Michael Harte, five pounds each....

....I leave to Elizabeth Hall all my plate (except my broad silver gilt bowl) that I have at the time of this will. I leave 10 pounds to the poor people of Stratford and my sword to Sir Thomas Combe....

....I leave to my daughter Susanna Hall (so that she is able to carry out my wishes in this will more easily), my house and lands in Stratford called New Place where I now live, two houses with lands in Henley Street in Stratford, and all my barns, stables, orchards, gardens, lands and houses in the towns hamlets, villages, fields & grounds of Stratford-upon-Avon, Oldstratford Bushopton & Welcombe in the county of Warwick. I also leave to her the house and lands in which John Robinson lives, near the Wardrobe in Blackfriars, London, and all my other lands and buildings....

....(the next sentence has been added in the space between the lines) I leave my second best bed with all the bedding and curtains to my wife. I leave my broad silver gilt bowl to my daughter Judith. After my debts have been paid, these gifts in my will have been given and the costs of my funeral have been paid, I leave all the rest of my belongings, leases, plate, jewels and household stuff to my son-in-law John Hall and my daughter Susanna, his wife, who are the executors of this will....

(signed) By me William Shakspeare

Notes:

li = pounds sterling

Roman numerals: x = 10

Source Two: Extract from a certificate by London tax commissioners 1597 (E 179/146/354)

Et Michaelis Antmms vifto;
 Antmms vifto;
 Robert Norton
 Peter Wallis
 William
 Thomas
 William

upon their respective oaths upon the
 25th day of God the 4th and that the
 made the said and affirm that the persons
 named were all other dead
 said names or their goods for assigned or
 the said or in their private or
 by the said Comrs of money on
 said and should towards the said
 the said laste Subscribes might not
 intended by them the said collector or
 letters of them or any of them to



Source Two: Transcript of an extract from a certificate by London tax commissioners 1597 (E 179/146/354)

St Martyns Outwhiche parishe.

Anthony Treavys.....viii liviii s
Robert Whorewood..... v li v s

St Ellens parishe.

Peter Dallila..... l li l s
William Shackspeare..... v li..... v s
Thomas Smythe gent..... xxx li xxx s
William Boyele..... xxx li xxx s

..... dyd saye and affirme that the persons hereunder named are all other dead departed and gone out of the sayd warde or their goodes so eloigned or conveyed out of the same or in suche pryvate or coverte manner kepte whereby the severall Sommes of money on them severally taxed and assessed towards the sayde second payment of the sayde laste subsydye nether might nor coulde by anye meanes by them the sayde Pettycollectors or ether of them be leveyed of them or anye of them to her majestie's use.

Source Two: Transcript in modernised language (E 179/146/354)

St Martyns Outwhiche parishe.

Anthony Treavys.....viii liviii s
Robert Whorewood..... v li v s

St Ellens parishe.

Peter Dallila..... l li l s
William Shackspeare..... v li..... v s
Thomas Smythe gent..... xxx li xxx s
William Boyele..... xxx li xxx s

.....said that the people named on this list are either dead or have left this area or have taken their belongings out of the area or have secretly hidden them so that the tax collectors cannot charge them the correct amount of tax for the second payment which will be sent to Her Majesty (Queen Elizabeth I).

Notes: Each line contains the name of the person being taxed, the first number in the line is the value of their belongings and the second number (at the end of the line) is the amount of tax they have to pay at this collection. Therefore Anthony Trevys has goods worth ?8 and he therefore owes 8 shillings in tax.

li = pounds sterling
s = shilling

x = 10
v = 5
vi = 6
iv = 4
i = 1

Roman numerals:
c = 100
l = 50

Source Three: Extract from an indenture by London tax commissioners, 1598 (E 179/146/369)

Dr. Helens wife

To the Honorable the Commissioners of the Exchequer
 the Shire of London
 John Robinson Esquire
 Richard Wrenor Esquire
 Peter Dally Esquire
 Robert Lowrie Esquire
 John Helles Esquire
 John Mowbray Esquire
 Robert de Vering Esquire
 Edward Berington Esquire
 Alexander Brokes Esquire
 Francis Lombes Esquire
 Anthony Smoades Esquire
 Richard de King Esquire
 Walter Lyngdon Esquire
 John Robinson Esquire
 John Dymond Esquire
 William Dutton Esquire
 George Apen Esquire

The said John Robinson Esquire
 the said Richard Wrenor Esquire
 the said Peter Dally Esquire
 the said Robert Lowrie Esquire
 the said John Helles Esquire
 the said John Mowbray Esquire
 the said Robert de Vering Esquire
 the said Edward Berington Esquire
 the said Alexander Brokes Esquire
 the said Francis Lombes Esquire
 the said Anthony Smoades Esquire
 the said Richard de King Esquire
 the said Walter Lyngdon Esquire
 the said John Robinson Esquire
 the said John Dymond Esquire
 the said William Dutton Esquire
 the said George Apen Esquire

Source Three: Transcript of an extract from an indenture by London tax commissioners, 1598 (E 179/146/369)

St Hellens parishe

Sir John Spencer knight a commissioner..ccc li.... xl li
 William Reade in landes cl li.... xxx li
 John Robinson the elder.....c li.....xiii li vi s viii d
 Richard Taylor doctor in landes and fees..x li.....xl s
 Peter Turnor doctor in landes & fees....x li.....xl s
 Peter Dallyla.....xxx li.....iiii li

Affid

Robert Honeywood gent in landes.....xl li.....viii li
 John Allseppe.....l li.....vi li xiiis iiiid
 John Morrrys.....xxx li.....iiii li
 Roberte Springe.....xxx li.....iiii li
 Edward Swayne in lande & fees.....x li.....xl s
 James Scoles.....xx li....liiii s iiiid
 Joane Lomley widdowe.....iii li.....viii s
 Anthony Snoade.....x li.....xxvi s viii d
 James Roking.....iii li.....viii s
 Walter Briggen.....v li.....xiiis iiiid
 John Robinson the yonger.....x li.....xxvis viiid
 John Scymme.....iii li....viii s

Affid

William Shakespeare.....v li.....xiii s iiiid
 George Axon.....iii li....viii s
 Edward Jackson.....iii li....viii s

Notes: Each line contains the name of the person being taxed, the first number in the line is the value of their belongings and the second number (at the end of the line) is the amount of tax they have to pay at this collection. Therefore Sir John Spencer has goods worth 300 and he therefore owes 40 in tax.

li = pounds sterling
 s = shilling

Roman numerals:

c = 100	v = 5	i = 1
l = 50	vi = 6	
x = 10	iv = 4	

Affid. = affidavit: this indicates that the person has not paid the tax which he/her owes to the Exchequer.

Source Four: Entry on main account of the Exchequer 1599 (E 372/445)



Transcript

'William Shakespeare in the parish of St. Helen's, 13s. 4d. of the first entire subsidy granted in the said thirty ninth year [of the reign of Queen Elizabeth] which is required upon the same there.'

Transcript in modernised English

'William Shakespeare, who lives in the parish of St. Helen's, owes 13 shillings and 4 pence for the first subsidy (tax) of 1599.'

Note: This Pipe Roll lists an old debt of tax owed (13s, 4d.) and points out that it is the business of the sheriff of Surrey and Sussex and according to a note in the margin of the document, this matter was sent to the Bishop of Winchester for his attention. In both Surrey and Sussex, the Bishop only had authority over the area of the Clink in Southwark. This is where many of the London Elizabethan theatres, including the Globe Theatre were built.