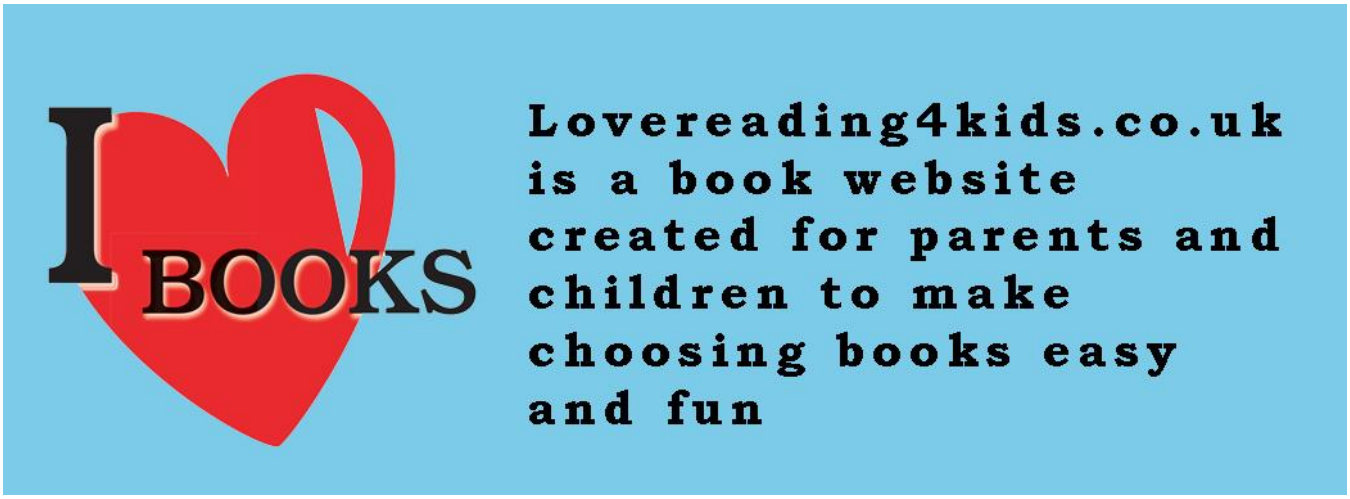

Opening extract from

The National Archives: Shakespeare Unclassified

Written by

Nick Hunter

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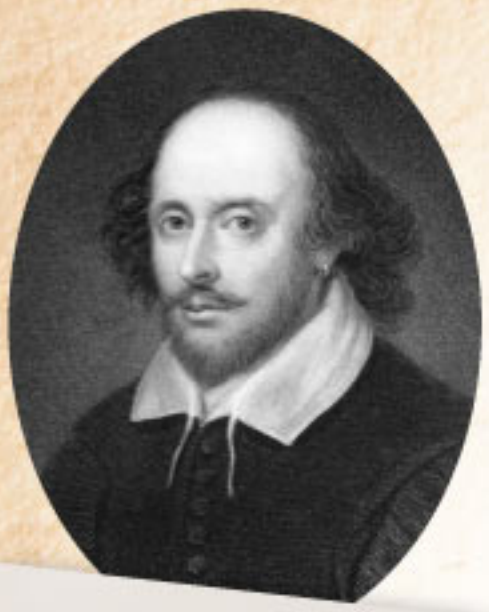
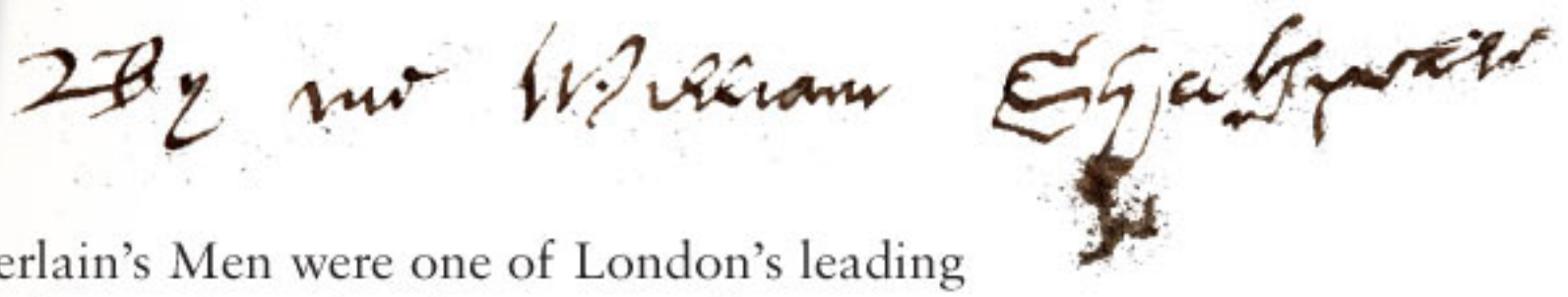


▲ *The mysterious William Shakespeare.*

A NEW STAGE

In spring 1599, visitors to the crime-infested taverns and bear-baiting arenas of London's Bankside would have seen a new building rising above the filthy, crowded streets. Word spread that this building, called the Globe Theatre, was the new home of the Lord Chamberlain's Men.



▲ *Signatures like this one, on his will, are the only definite examples we have of Shakespeare's own handwriting.*

The Lord Chamberlain's Men were one of London's leading groups of actors. These talented performers could entertain their audiences with hilarious comedy or shock them with heart-breaking tragedy. The secret to their success lay with the person who wrote their plays; a young man from rural Warwickshire who would become the most brilliant playwright of his time. His name was William Shakespeare.

▲ *The theatres of Tudor London were remembered in a series of postage stamps (1995), such as this stamp of the Swan Theatre.*

Risky Profession

Shakespeare and his partners had a lot riding on the success of the Globe Theatre. Earning a living as an actor and playwright during the reign of Elizabeth I was tough. An outbreak of plague could close the theatres for months or even years. If a play offended the wrong person, they could end up in prison, or murdered like Shakespeare's rival, Christopher Marlowe.

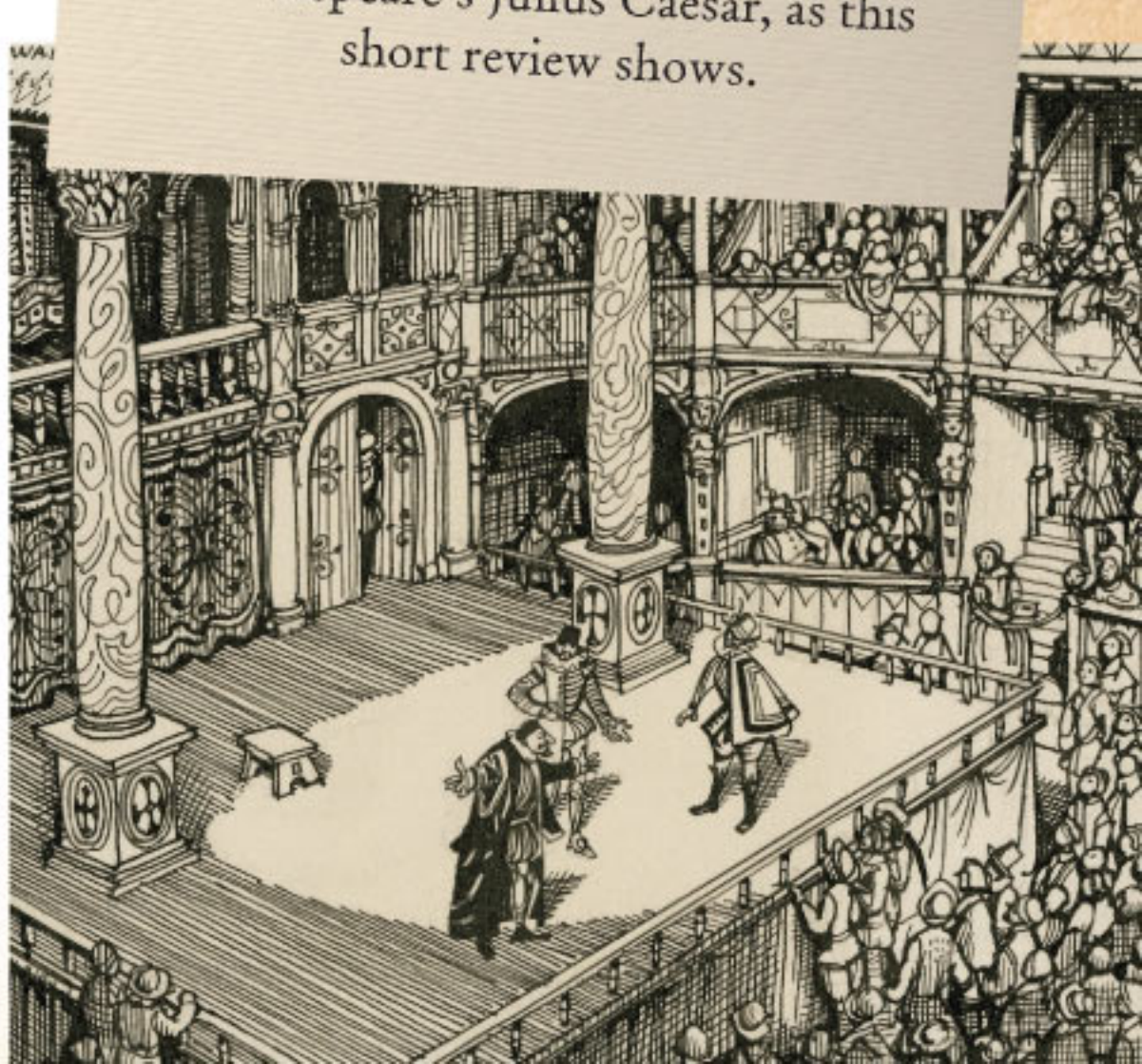
◀ *Theatres had to compete with other popular entertainments, such as bear baiting, in which a bear was attacked by dogs.*

▲ *Shakespeare grew up in the country, where he may have been inspired by a travelling group of actors.*

How did a boy from a country town, with a basic grammar-school education, create some of the world's greatest poetry and plays? This book uses documents from Shakespeare's life to piece together his story and to try and explain how William Shakespeare became the greatest writer of his age, or any other.

"Oh how the audience
Were ravished, with what wonder
they went home."

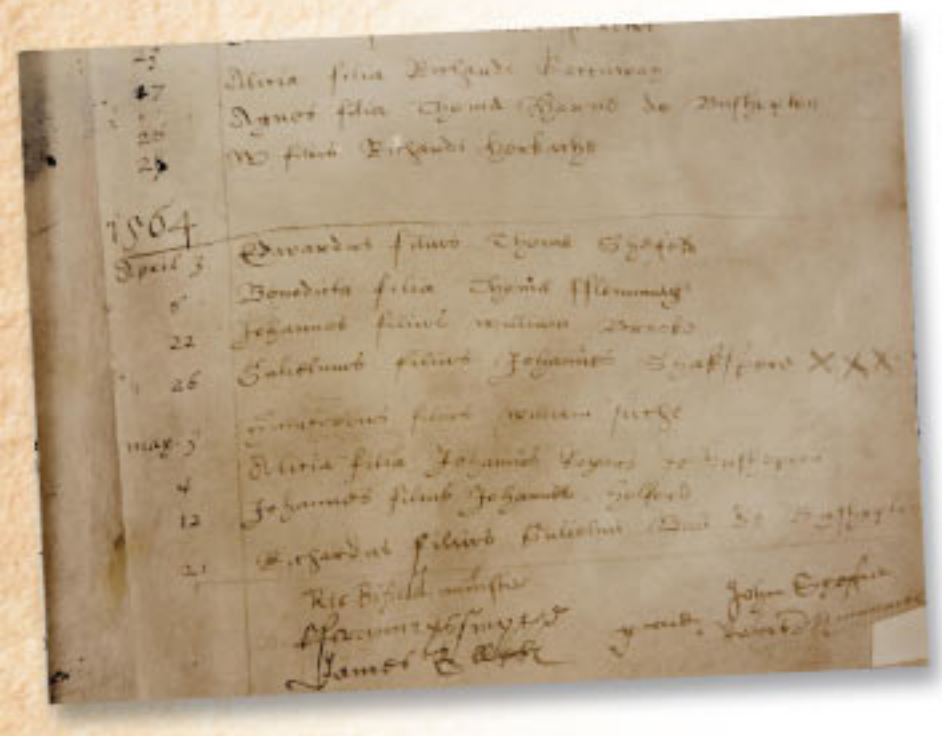
Audiences were entranced by Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, as this short review shows.



► *London's theatres were popular with people from all levels of society.*

Who was William Shakespeare?

William Shakespeare has been famous for so long that it is amazing how little we actually know about him. We know a child of that name was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, in April 1564. We know when he died and various documents give us a glimpse of Shakespeare's life in Stratford and London. But there is so much that we cannot be sure about.



▲ *This entry in the parish register records the baptism of Shakespeare on Wednesday 26 April 1564.*

What did Shakespeare look like?

There is one surviving portrait of Shakespeare that was probably painted in his lifetime, but experts can't be sure that it does in fact show Shakespeare. An engraving in the first collection of Shakespeare's plays and the memorial statue in Stratford church both appeared after his death, although people who knew the playwright were still alive to complain if they did not look like him. Every picture since has been based on one of these portraits.

▲ *If this portrait does show the face of William Shakespeare, it is probably the only likeness we have that was painted during his lifetime.*

What did he write?

We may not be certain what he looked like, but at least we have Shakespeare's words; or do we? His plays and poems include around a million words, but we only have 14 words in Shakespeare's own handwriting, and 12 of them are examples of his signature. In each of those signature examples, Shakespeare, Shakspere or Shakespe, spells his name differently.

Some experts even think that Shakespeare's plays were written by someone else, but we'll come back to that later.

▲ *Official documents tell us that this house was where Shakespeare's mother, Mary Arden, grew up.*

▼ *Seven years after his death, two of Shakespeare's fellow actors published 36 of his plays in this book, called the* First Folio.

▲ *Memorial to Shakespeare in his home town of Stratford-upon-Avon.*

Country boy

Shakespeare's story begins in the small town of Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, where he was born in April 1564. Stratford was a prosperous country town and Shakespeare's father, John Shakespeare, was one of the leading citizens.

John Shakespeare was elected to many important jobs in the town, including high bailiff, or mayor, in 1568. He worked as a glove-maker, creating fashionable and expensive gloves from white leather. This was a very respectable trade. Shakespeare's mother, Mary, was the daughter of a local farmer. He was the third of eight children, although his elder brother and sister died before he was born.

Plague comes to Stratford

Shakespeare was quite lucky to survive childhood at all. Three months after his birth, Stratford was hit by the plague. In just a few months, this deadly outbreak wiped out one-tenth of the town's population, including a family of four in Henley Street, where the Shakespeare family lived.

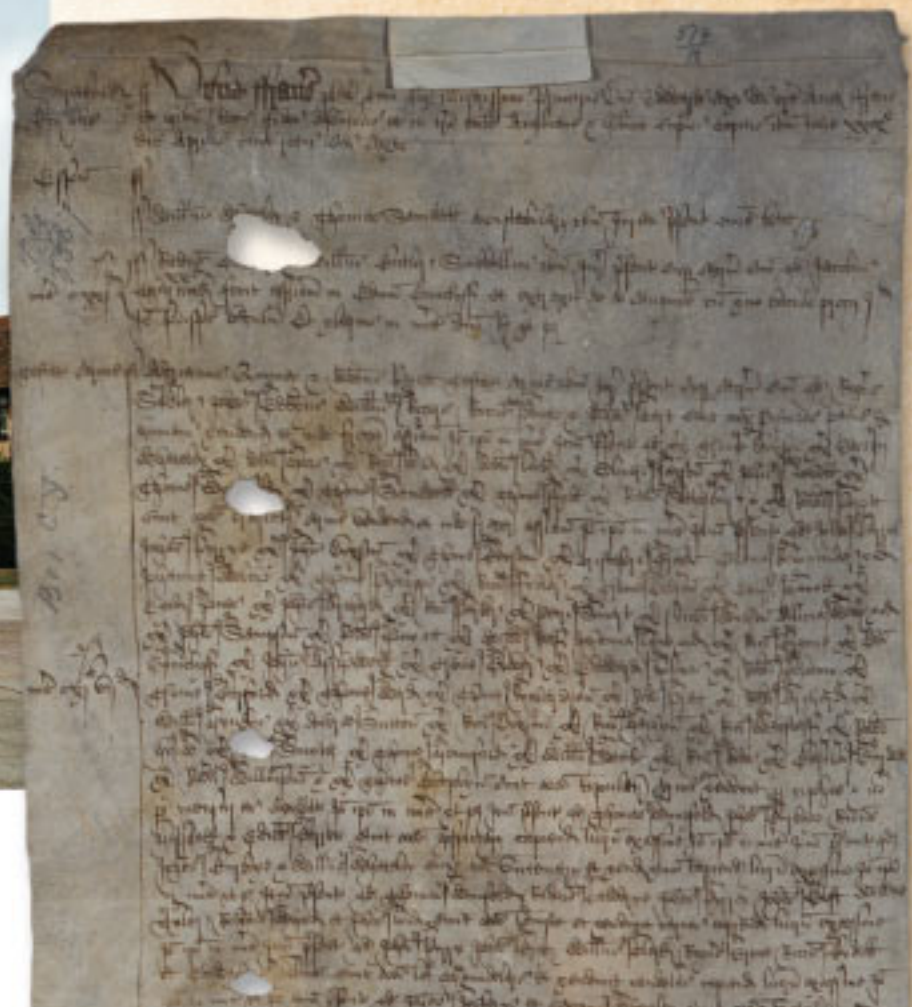
Shakespeare's birthday

Shakespeare's birthday is celebrated on 23 April, which is also St George's Day, which remembers the patron saint of England. No one can be sure that this was actually his birthday. However, he was certainly baptized three days later, which was normal at the time as one in five babies died before they were a month old.

◀ *The ornate leather gloves made by John Shakespeare would have been the height of fashion for Stratford's leading families.*

▲ *William Shakespeare was born in this house on Henley Street, which was also his father's workshop.*

▼ *Shakespeare and his friends played with simple homemade toys and games.*



▲ *This document is the earliest evidence that John Shakespeare lived in Stratford. In 1552, he was fined for making a refuse heap in Henley Street. All kinds of human and animal waste could be found in Tudor streets, and John Shakespeare may have been using this waste for the smelly process of softening leather.*