

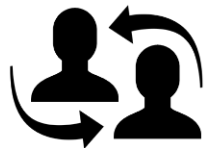
Shakespeare

Comedies

Antonio (*The Merchant of Venice*) borrows money from Shylock the Jewish moneylender in order to finance his friend Bassanio's wooing of Portia. Shylock demands from Antonio a pound of his flesh as a bond if he cannot repay the loan. Bassanio succeeds in wooing Portia – to do so he has to choose between three caskets of gold, silver and lead. But meanwhile Antonio's ships have failed and he cannot repay the loan, so Shylock, maddened by the elopement of his daughter Jessica with her Gentile Venetian lover, demands his pound of flesh as his right under Venetian law. Portia now disguises herself as a young lawyer to oppose Shylock in court. Will justice prevail? And what *is* justice in this case?

Twelfth Night After a storm, Viola is cast ashore on the coast of Illyria, having become separated from her twin brother Sebastian. She decides to disguise herself as a boy and serve the ruler, Count Orsino, who is in love with Olivia, a young noblewoman. Olivia has recently lost her brother, and has resolved to spend seven years in mourning for him. Orsino sends Viola as a love-messenger to Olivia, who then swiftly falls in love with Viola in her disguise as the boy Cesario. Complications ensue... (But remember that Viola has an identical twin brother..) Meanwhile Olivia's drunken uncle Sir Toby Belch, his friend Sir Andrew Aguecheek and Maria, Olivia's waiting-gentlewoman, plot to trick Malvolio, Olivia's egotistical and puritanical steward. By means of a forged letter written by Maria, they make him believe that Olivia is in love with him and that he will please her by dressing up in yellow stockings, a colour and a fashion which she detests. Once again, complications ensue...

The Tempest Prospero and his daughter Miranda have been the only human inhabitants of a Mediterranean island for many years. A tempest wrecks a ship and the survivors reach the island. Prospero tells Miranda, who is distressed by the fate of the people in the ship, that he was once the Duke of Milan, but had been deposed by his brother Antonio in conjunction with Alonso, the King of Naples. Both these men had been on this wrecked ship and are now on the island, along with Ferdinand, the son of the King of Naples. Prospero has learnt magic arts and his enemies are now in his power. Will he choose revenge or reconciliation?

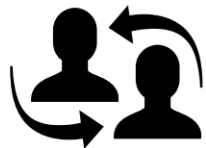


Tragedies

Macbeth and his fellow-general Banquo are returning from defeating an army of Scottish rebels and Norwegian invaders. They are met by three witches, who foretell that Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor and then King of Scotland. Macbeth is greeted by Duncan, King of Scotland, who proclaims him Thane of Cawdor, thus fulfilling The witches' prophecy. Duncan tells Macbeth that he plans to visit Macbeth's castle. When Lady Macbeth learns of this in a letter from her husband, she resolves that Duncan will enter the castle, but never leave it. But blood will have blood...

Hamlet's father, the King of Denmark, has died, and his mother Gertrude has married Hamlet's uncle Claudius, the old king's brother, just a month after his father's death, and Claudius is now King. The Ghost of Hamlet's father appears to him on the battlements of Elsinore Castle and tells him that he was murdered by his brother Claudius. He tells Hamlet to avenge his murder without harming his mother. Hamlet decides to pretend to be mad to avoid suspicion about his behavior. But is this just a pretence or does he really lose his wits? And how is he to carry out his dead father's wishes when all the power of the state is in the hands of his uncle the King?

King Lear decides to divide his kingdom between his three daughters, but first demands of them to say which of them loves him most. His two older daughters, Goneril and Regan, declare their love in extravagant terms, which pleases Lear, and they each receive a large part of his kingdom as a reward. The youngest daughter, Cordelia, refuses to express her love as anything more than what is her duty as a daughter. Lear is outraged and disinherits her. He now plans to spend his old age alternately visiting each of the older daughters with a retinue of 100 knights. What could go wrong? A descent begins into madness, alienation and horror, only redeemed by a final reconciliation with Cordelia, his truly loyal daughter.



Histories

Shakespeare's history plays cover the turbulent period of rebellions and civil war in the centuries preceding the Elizabethan age.

Richard II is a brilliant but unstable king who becomes a tragic figure when deposed by his cousin Henry Bolingbroke, who then becomes ***Henry IV***. The play contains the great patriotic speech by the dying John of Gaunt "***This England...***"

In ***Henry IV Parts One and Two***, Shakespeare shows the fate of rebellions led by Henry's former supporters. Leading characters are Henry's wayward son Prince Hal and his companion, the fat reprobate Sir John Falstaff, possibly the most memorable of all Shakespeare's characters.

Henry V, as the reformed Prince Hal becomes, leads his country into war with France, culminating with victory against great odds at the Battle of Agincourt. Shakespeare's great patriotic play.

Like Hollywood, Shakespeare takes liberties with historical fact, but shows great understanding of the dynamics of power politics.

The Sonnets A poetic sequence of 154 sonnets which begins with 16 sonnets (possibly written to order?) urging an attractive rich young man to get married so that he can have a child who will be a copy of his beauty when his own has gone. Then in Sonnet 17 something quite unexpected happens: Shakespeare seems to have fallen in love with the man. There follows a relationship which includes ecstasy and subsequent agony, delight and bitterness, in which Shakespeare shows an extraordinary insight into the human heart. The situation is further complicated by a mysterious and enigmatic Dark Lady and her relationships with both men...