

# **Shakespeare For Playwrights**

## **A Short Introduction**

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There is then creative reading, as well as creative writing.

R.W. Emerson, "The American Scholar"

## Preface

Where do you begin with Shakespeare? The materials are so vast, the topics are so varied, the choice and depth of any one perspective over the vast array of other choices and perspectives can be mind numbing and intimidating. It also doesn't help that much that is written about Shakespeare is by scholars and is therefore written mostly for other scholars. So if you are a playwright—and no one has more to gain, more to learn or more to understand by becoming better acquainted with Shakespeare than other playwrights—where do you begin? How do you start? What can help you find what you, as a playwright, most need to understand about Shakespeare and to be capable of doing this without drowning the moment you dip your toe into the overwhelming ocean we call Shakespeare studies? This little pamphlet (if indeed it is so) is the beginning of an ongoing answer to a concern expressed to me by a playwriting friend. I love reading Shakespeare's plays and I love reading about them and about him and his fellow play practitioners. When I read books and essays by and about Shakespeare, every once in while a small kernel of information will present itself as being especially significant to me as a playwright and it is these kernels I'm looking to gather here and share with other playwrights.

First a few words about playwriting and being a playwright. I have taken many writing classes and workshops, some have helped me enormously, some have been worth my while, but others not so much. At this point in my career (I have been writing creatively for over twenty years) I am aware my growth as a playwright is up to me. Classes and workshops help to a point, but there is also a point where every creative writer will need to venture out on your own. Every single writer (which includes anyone who has even a hint of an interest in being a creative writer) will at some point need to move beyond the classes and workshops (though not beyond the friends you make in those classes and workshops) because others can only help you up to a certain point. You will at this point (and only you can determine when you have reached this point) need to become more self-directive. (You will also eventually understand from the beginning of your first class, your first workshop or your first attempt to write something creative—you have always been a self-directed writer.) There are two things every writer needs to find for him- or herself: your artistic aesthetic and your voice as a writer. These two things are quite particular to you and only you. Others can help guide you and keep you on track along the way, but in the end only you will be capable of taking yourself where you need to go, so you can discover, learn, grow and understand all of the things about yourself you want and need to know so you can then express what you understand and who you are to the universe.

I would also like to add, I am not totally immersed in every play Shakespeare wrote or in every aspect of his career as a playwright. My exposure to different plays varies dramatically. I too am not a scholar so I don't approach Shakespeare as a scholar might. I approach these plays as I approach all plays I read or see on stage—as a playwright. It is my sensibility as a playwright that will guide what I talk about, why I talk about it and how I perceive these things. If you run my thoughts past a scholar, many may disagree with me (though I doubt all of them will). My overall intention with this so-called pamphlet is to hopefully churn and instigate questions and open up further possibilities for other playwrights to seek, discover and eventually answer for themselves. Ultimately I am offering you, as a fellow playwright, a place to begin your own journey with, to and through Shakespeare.

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## 1. Born At The Right Time

Shakespeare was born at an incredibly fortunate time, as professional theatre was just beginning in London. Throughout England mystery plays and morality plays (the main source of theatre for much of the century before Shakespeare was born) that had previously existed were fading from peoples' interest and the first few "purpose built" theatres were being built in London. Touring acting companies had and still existed, but the culture as a whole was changing—London was changing and growing. People were making money, earning a living, as the society shifted away from a more agrarian life style toward more of a commerce oriented city life style. This also meant some people actually had spending money for more superfluous things such as going to the theatre.

It is not known when Shakespeare came to London and began acting in plays (or holding horses outside of the theatre, as one story has it). In the late 1580s and early 1590s there were several acting companies (they were actually called "playing companies" and actors were known as "players") around London and Shakespeare likely worked with one or more of them. The watershed in theatre was in 1594, when two new royally supported playing companies were assembled: Admiral's Men, led by Edward Alleyn, and Chamberlain's Men, led by Richard Burbage. These two up-and-coming actors had different acting styles and would build their reputations playing the lead roles of different playwrights: Alleyn in Christopher Marlowe's plays and Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and Burbage in Shakespeare's plays. One important difference is Marlowe was killed in 1593 and Kyd would die before 1594 ended, whereas Shakespeare was only beginning to find his voice as a writer. After Queen Elizabeth's death in 1603, the Chamberlain's Men became King's Men, after their new patron.

In 1594 Shakespeare's timing was spot-on, as he became an original shareholder in Chamberlain's Men. Shakespeare also owned a share in the theatre they played in, The Globe. This is where his money came from. As a sharer, he shared in the daily receipts and he shared in the daily take for the rental of the theatre (50% of the daily receipts went to the company shareholders and the other 50% went to the owners of the theatre). I think there were eight sharers in 1594—not a bad gig if you can get it. Part of Shakespeare's commitment to the company (along with acting in plays) was to write two plays a year, one comedy and one drama (history or tragedy). The Chamberlain's Men/King's Men were the only playing company to incorporate a writer in the company. This makes Shakespeare the first resident or in-house playwright any theatre in London ever had. From 1594 until 1642 (when the government closed all theatres) Chamberlain's Men/King's Men were the most successful and longest lasting playing company in London. After Shakespeare died in 1616 at age 52, King's Men continued to keep an in-house playwright with the company until they were forced to close in 1642. Once Shakespeare joined Chamberlain's Men/King's Men he spent his remaining career with them.

Because professional theatre was just beginning, there was no body of work to draw from to create plays or to build off of. Some ancient Greek and Roman plays existed, but these were not easily accessible to the culture as a whole. One advantage of being in London was the literacy rates were higher than in the countryside so more books were becoming available, but plays by the ancients were rarely translated. The publishing industry (with movable type—remember Gutenberg) existed, but it too was at an early stage in its development and London was well behind (the Renaissance began in southern Europe and moved north) what the European countries were publishing, so again they needed to wait until books were translated before they had access to them (unless they knew or could read more than one language). So where do you get plays, when they don't really exist?

## 2. Where Did Shakespeare's Plays Come From

Theatre was becoming increasingly popular in London, but one of their biggest challenges was where and how to get new plays so the people in London would come back to see another play. (The playing companies who toured the countryside only needed four or five plays on hand to keep their ever changing audiences satisfied.) New work was desired and needed to be turned out quickly (by both playwrights and playing companies) so Shakespeare and his contemporaries worked from sources, much as the Greeks had drawn their plays from myths. Shakespeare must have been a voracious reader. Many of the new plays were drawn from folk tales, history and the classics—stories the people already knew or had a sense of, but these plays (again as with the Greeks) needed to be reimagined and reinvented for both contemporary audiences and that intriguing new form of storytelling—the stage.

Almost every play Shakespeare wrote came from another source, but he was a better storyteller and had a better sense of drama than the sources he worked from (these sources sometimes included rewriting plays by other playwrights). Shakespeare also combined, sometimes in unusual ways, elements from different stories. He understood or could see how certain storylines could feed into and compliment one another. As a writer Shakespeare put his distinctive stamp on each one of his plays and characters. He also had the unique ability to write both comedies and dramatic plays with aplomb! I can not think of another writer who shares this degree of versatility with Shakespeare. The theatre industry was new in Shakespeare's day and the most important element in allowing the industry to grow, develop and evolve is new scripts—theatre will not move forward without new voices and new scripts!

### 3. Poetry And Plays—Poetry In Plays

Before the invention of movable type writing and reading were only for the wealthy and well educated; however, with movable type things were changing. As more people learned how to read, there was more demand for books; with a larger demand for books, more writers were needed. Shakespeare was better educated than most, but he didn't attend university. Many of the playwrights in London before Shakespeare was writing were university educated, so their training with the Greek and Latin classics was deeper than Shakespeare's. The University Wits, as they were called (Christopher Marlowe and a few other university educated playwrights, though not Thomas Kyd) were helping theatre to grow and evolve by writing new plays based upon or inspired by the classics. However, their overall focus was upon poetry and the poetry of the language. When audiences went to a play in Shakespeare's time they went to "hear" a play, not to see a play. They went to "hear" the poetry the playwrights had written. For those audience members who were illiterate, going to see/hear a play was the only way they could be exposed to poetry and storytelling (as TV was a few years away yet). One of the important things Shakespeare did was to put more focus on the story and the drama of the situation. Thomas Kyd was also writing plays with a better understanding of storytelling and with more fully rounded storylines and as he was writing earlier than Shakespeare he is likely one of the reasons Shakespeare was able to develop in this direction. Blank verse (ten syllable, unrhymed lines) was popular with playwrights and audiences before Shakespeare was writing plays, so it was a natural form for him to work in.

Shakespeare's early plays were written largely in blank verse, but not exclusively. Both verse and prose were and could be used together in a play. Who was speaking (or who was being spoken to) is often what determined if the dialogue was in verse or prose; typically (though not always) kings, nobles and courtiers spoke in verse, whereas commoners spoke in prose. Due to their proficiency with blank verse, the University Wits were changing the way dialogue sounded in plays; booming "fourteeners" were the previous preferred line length, before blank verse caught on (this may have been inherited from Latin, as I think a fourteen syllable line was to have worked well in Latin, as a ten syllable line works well in English). Their training with the classics gave them a leg up with not only stories to draw from, but also with how well they expressed themselves. However, the University Wits were more concerned with being poets and writing poetry, than they were with storytelling.

Throughout all of this Shakespeare was learning and developing his particular poetic sensibility. However, Shakespeare was also a green writer to begin with as we all are. He too had to learn and develop his skills and his craft as he was writing, as the demand for new plays was strong. One advantage Shakespeare had was writing when theatre was only beginning to develop, which included the need to develop audiences. Much had to be learned about how plays and storytelling for the stage actually worked. You can see this too if you look at the plays of the ancient Greeks, as the older Aeschylus (despite his poetic abilities) is a less developed and less sophisticated storyteller than either Sophocles or Euripides (Aeschylus was also a more improved and sophisticated storyteller compared to writers of his and previous generations). What we might consider clumsy storytelling probably sounded rather ingenious and maybe even fluid compared to the more cumbersome and didactic mystery plays and morality plays from previous generations. What I think separated Shakespeare from the other playwrights from the very beginning was he had an innate sense of the dramatic, which I think most of the University Wits sadly lacked as they focused more on the poetry. Shakespeare, on the other hand, focused more on the story being told and more importantly on the drama in the story being told. When Shakespeare worked from another source, he often tightened up the time-line from the source in how quickly things played out—this greatly enhanced the drama every time he did this.

#### **4. Greenhorn Mistakes**

Shakespeare was not born writing great plays. His early plays show many greenhorn mistakes. This is not a bad thing. (Think about some of your first scenes, plays and workshops when you read his early plays. You will be shocked, as I have been, to see some of the same types of shortcomings and missteps from Shakespeare.) We all need to go through this and Shakespeare did his share of it, but he too learned and grew as a writer and he became more experienced and obviously more proficient. Making mistakes, if that is what you want to call them, is one of the best ways of teaching yourself to become a better writer. I prefer to think of mistakes as “opportunities” to learn and grow—all writers should.



## 5. Shakespeare As Co-writer

Some of the early printed versions of Shakespeare's plays show the likelihood there may have been another playwright or two involved in writing the script. For my playwright's sensibility, I think Shakespeare began writing by reworking scenes previously written by other playwrights, in scripts that were currently being performed by the company he was working with—he may also have been acting in these scripts. I suspect, as an actor, Shakespeare made suggestions to improve a few scenes. He might have written them out on his own and brought them to the person in charge. After this worked a few times I suspect he was asked to look at particular scenes to see if he could improve them. There too must have come a point where Shakespeare was writing well enough that the older scripts shed enough of the original writer and took on something new and unique—Shakespeare's dramatic sensibility.

It was normal for playwrights to work on plays together or to job out scenes or sections of plays to other writers, but not all playwrights wanted to work this way. From what I can tell Shakespeare preferred to write alone, at least until later in his career. At least six plays (there are more) within the Shakespearean cannon draw my attention as having had another writer involved, each for different reasons. The first two are from Shakespeare's early days; the others are from later in his career.

### *The Taming of the Shrew*

For my playwright's sensibility, *Shrew* has too complex of a structure to believe Shakespeare could have written it as early as it shows up in a chronology of his plays, so I suspect he rewrote a script someone else had written and was already being performed. The other writer has not been identified.

### *Titus Andronicus*

George Peele is thought to be the other writer behind this play (either as co-writer with Shakespeare or as a play by Peele which was later reworked by Shakespeare). My playwright's sensibility tells me Shakespeare took this existing play and reworked particular scenes—making the play more popular! This play offers a good example of clear shifts in certain scenes between the two writers.

### *Pericles*

George Wilkins is thought to be the original writer of this play. I think the older Shakespeare found something of interest in the story, so he reworked much of it. This is the first of what are known as the Late Romances and I suspect it may have triggered Shakespeare's interest in this direction.

### *Henry 8, The Two Noble Kinsmen and Cardenio*

For my sensibility these are the only plays Shakespeare worked on with the intention of co-writing with another writer from the beginning and John Fletcher was the co-writer. *Henry 8* may be the only one of the three which Shakespeare was the main writer on (it is the only play of the three in the cannon from the beginning). The other two plays came to the cannon later (neither play has been fully accepted as some scholars think only plays with a majority of the play by Shakespeare should be in the cannon). My guess is Fletcher wrote between 60-70% of *TNK*, so I think he was the main writer of the play; this is also a play about young love, which would have been of more interest to the younger and less experienced Fletcher (he was fifteen years younger than Shakespeare). What we have of a play called *Cardenio* remains hidden within an 18<sup>th</sup> Century adaptation, *Double Falsehood*, by Lewis Theobald.

## 6. Rethinking Royalties And Copyrights

If it sounds strange and maybe a bit scary that anyone could rewrite someone else's play—that's how it was back then! Professional theatre was in its infancy, so you might not want to impose the certainty of your 21<sup>st</sup> Century ideas and attitudes upon them. Any profession in its infancy will often have much to learn which you may already understand and take for granted. When you were a playwright in Shakespeare's day you wrote a play and you sold the play to a theatre or theatre company. The theatre company then "owned" the play and they could change *their play* as they wished (even actors could do this—yikes!). They could perform it as often or as little as they wanted and the writer never received any royalties whatsoever—only the original payment! Shakespeare made a great living because he was a sharer, but he never received one penny of royalties. Theatre, then as now, was a challenging and risky business. Profits were good when plays were popular, and with plays that were not so popular, profits were low or worse. Therefore audiences' responses and attitudes carried much weight with the people who decided which plays to produce or to not produce—such is theatre!

These same types of challenges continue with publishing plays. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century copyright laws we're used to didn't come into being until 1709. Before then, the person who "owned" the so-called copyright was the publisher or printer (whomever registered it with the Stationers—the Stationers is a company that oversaw the entire printing industry). Once a book or play was purchased or acquired from a writer (or a would-be writer) and the printer registered the book or play with the Stationers, for a fee—that printer then had the right to publish that play or book as many times as he wanted to, again with no money for the writer—aside from the original payment. And you think things are difficult now!

## 7. Shakespeare's Characters

Shakespeare's characters are simply the most three-dimensional characters ever written. If you want to better understand how to create characters with depth and humanity (and inhumanity)—spend time with Shakespeare! This is Shakespeare's most important contribution to playwriting in my opinion.

Shakespeare also had the ability of allowing each character to have his or her own voice. People who know more about this than do I say every single character he wrote (not including walk-ons of course) each had a unique and individual speech pattern. As a playwright, this sounds next to impossible but if you know and understand each and every character well enough—think about it!

There is an energy, a human energy, in Shakespeare's writing! I don't know how he did this, but I feel it when I read his plays and I feel it when I see his plays on stage. This isn't about one character or scene, but about how they all mix and intermix together. This could be a reflection of how integrated and intertwined human to human contact was back then, but with the other playwrights of the day (my exposure here is no where near complete) I simply don't sense the same depth of human energy. Again if you want to better understand this for yourself—spend some time with Shakespeare!

## 8. Shakespeare Worked From Sources

When I work with Shakespeare as a source (or any writer or artist as a source), I'm not looking to retell the story he told—as with Shakespeare, I use this work to springboard from to tell my own story (and often I play against peoples' expectations). Shakespeare borrowed and combined different pieces from divergent sources to suit his purposes, even if he was telling a story similar to his main source. If you do this with Shakespeare, you will often (and should) subvert his plays. All great playwrights were subversive writers in their day, it is only later when they reach the status of becoming “classic” and maybe even the voice of an age, when they become the “standard”. Subverting Shakespeare is what Tom Stoppard did with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*; he used Shakespeare's characters to a different purpose—to tell a completely different story and a different type of story. You can do this too, with Shakespeare or with any source (playwright or other) you might choose to work from or with. You can also work with the source (as Stoppard did) or you can work against the source.

## 9. To Poetry Or Not To Poetry

When you wrote a play in Shakespeare's day you were not a playwright—you were a poet! For me Shakespeare is not about the poetry; it is not about the heart beat in iambic pentameter; it is not about the unrhymed blank verse. Is the poetry there—yes it is! So what?! I love the “seven ages of man” speech by Jaques, in *As You Like It*—that is I love the speech, as a monologue; however, I don't like how the speech is utilized within the play, as the speech stalls out the telling of the story and doesn't move the story forward (structurally I understand the need for Shakespeare to “buy some time” on stage for Orlando to retrieve Adam from where he left him, but the monologue doesn't connect well enough to the rest of the story, at least not for my tastes). I go to “see and hear” a play. I want to hear a story told, if it is poetic all the better, but I don't get hung up on or distracted with the poetry. In Shakespeare's day audiences looked forward to the poetry—so it is there and it should be there, as they accepted and wanted their plays this way. I want to see and hear an efficient and well told story! Be aware of what today's audiences want. Don't kiss their butts, but be aware you need to communicate your story in ways they can appreciate and understand—otherwise the bills don't get paid!

Plays are about human behavior, not words, not poetry. Many writers and poets don't understand this. Many writers and poets have written plays that are poetic, but do not *come to life* on the stage. A poem or a play is not about the language, the words or even images. A poem or a play is important and successful because of the weight, the meaning, the burden it puts upon you as a reading, listening or viewing audience. Shakespeare is great because of what we learn and understand about the human condition through his words. The words are the conduit with which he conveys this to us (and they are important and necessary so he can accomplish this) but don't get hung up on the words or the difficult (or unusual) word order. Shakespeare's plays are not about the words, it is never about the words—but without the words none of the rest of it would come through. This goes for your plays as well.

## **10. Sound Bites**

The main intent of sound bites (which is largely fostered by politicians, the government and “the media”) is to limit, if not completely stop any genuine conversation or dialogue from happening. This is deliberate and manipulative. Art opens out; politics and government shuts out!

Shakespeare and any genuine art form will leave room for the audience to enter into and engage in a dialogue with the work of art, which then helps to move the society and the culture in new, unexpected and sometimes even in surprising directions. If your sensibility is lame and pathetic and you are interested in the childishness and irresponsibility of sound bites read another playwright (and please don't read my work either). There are no sound bites in Shakespeare—period!

## 11. The Plays And Chronology

Shakespeare's plays are usually broken into the three categories of Comedies, Histories and Tragedies used when his plays were gathered together seven years after he died in the First Folio of Shakespeare. The Late Romances is another category sometimes included, but as with the editors of the Folios (there were four Folios) I include them with the Comedies. These categories are not exact or definitive, as some history plays can come under the Tragedy category. I am going to talk about all three categories, but I will approach and interpret them as I always approach Shakespeare's plays—from a playwright's perspective. That is, how I order his plays might be a touch different as I am not looking at the same criteria a scholar might. I will take each category by itself, but as I said a few plays will cross over.

Now that I've mentioned the First Folio, you should know most plays from Shakespeare's day were not published, but those that were, were usually published in a cheap paperback type of edition called a quarto; these were cheap pamphlets and were easily discarded and many plays that were published in quarto have not survived to the present day. The First Folio was a larger and more expensive book and therefore has survived in larger numbers. The "folio" and "quarto" designations are based upon the number of times a single sheet of paper was folded in the making of the book. Folio is larger, so a single sheet of paper was folded only once giving the printer four pages (printing on both sides) to work on, whereas a quarto is folded twice, to give the printer eight smaller pages to fill up.

Thirty-six of Shakespeare's plays have come down to us in the First Folio. Eighteen of these plays were also published in a quarto version (some in more than one quarto). One exception here is *Pericles*; the only version of it to come down to us is from a quarto publication of 1608, as it wasn't published in the First Folio. The distinctions between some of the quartos and the First Folio version of the plays can be vast and intriguing, but a few are not so different. There are complicated and contradictory arguments involved in many of these situations—it is a Pandora's box, so open it at your own risk. In the last three or four decades questions concerning the origins of the different versions have been being seriously questioned as to which "version" might be the "actual" version of the play. The truth is play scripts in Shakespeare's day were far more fluid than they are in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; these scripts are not carved in stone no matter what we may think. Since the 18<sup>th</sup> Century the versions readers have been reading (and audiences have been seeing) are often a hybrid when more than one version is available to draw from; hybrid versions have fallen out of favor, but they remain ingrained in much of the material out there. There too are eighteen plays where we only have the First Folio version of the play. There are also a few other plays being looked at and studied under the umbrella of Shakespeare; these are plays Shakespeare is thought to have contributed to or worked on to a smaller degree. An example would be *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (see section 5) which comes to us in a quarto from 1634.

There is no comprehensive agreement upon the exact order (or the exact dates) within the scholarship community. Any chronology you see of Shakespeare's plays will always be a *rough* chronology as written records of when his plays were first produced (or even *if* they were produced) are sparse beyond belief. I will only use dates for basic parameters as exact dates (even if they were clearly known) are not as important as understanding some ways in which the plays relate to and grow out of one another. (You too know from experience that your plays have not been written in an exact and perfect order.) My chronology is also supplemented by other things I've read and things I've pick up on as a playwright, which can diverge occasionally (but not much) from a scholar's perspective.

## 11.1. Comedies

I break the comedies into three general groups; discussion of a fourth group, the Late Romances, will follow and I'll finish with three outliers. What I find most interesting about these four groups as a whole is what I can understand or glean about Shakespeare evolving as a playwright throughout his career. I will also look at the two other major categories through this same basic lens.

Early comedies (1590-1596):

*Two Gentleman of Verona*  
*The Comedy of Errors*  
*Love's Labour's Lost*  
*Midsummer Night's Dream*

The early comedies are fairly straight forward with basic stock types of two-dimensional characters and situations (disguised characters and mistaken identities—that sort of thing). *Two Gents* feels as if it is the earliest original play for my playwright's sensibility, as it shows Shakespeare in his greenest (though certainly not incompetent) form. *Errors* is a smartly reworked reinvention (Shakespeare doubled their number) of *The Menaechmus Twins* by the Roman playwright, Plautus. An intriguing exception among these four plays might be *LLL*, which shows some growth and some interesting self challenges by Shakespeare, even if the movement forward is not fully refined. *Midsummer* is easily the most polished and whole play in this early group, which is apparent by its popularity.

High comedies (1597-1601):

*Much Ado About Nothing*  
*As You Like It*  
*Twelfth Night*

The high comedies are all well loved and often performed (with some of Shakespeare's more memorable female characters). Shakespeare not only worked from sources, but he recycled his own plays: *AYLI* is a reinvented and more sophisticated version of *Two Gents*, as is *Twelfth Night* of *Errors*.

Problem comedies (1603-1605):

*Measure for Measure*  
*All's Well that Ends Well*

Up to this point, Shakespeare seemed to be doing well, but once he got past *Twelfth Night* he struggled with comedies. There is no doubt in my mind he was looking for something new, a new form. A few writers back then were interested in finding forms of tragicomedy, but the form wasn't widely accepted yet. Around the years when he working was on *Measure* and *All's Well* I can feel how unsettled he is as a writer. Up to this point it was rather obvious in which directions a writer might evolve, but after plays such as *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Twelfth Night*—where do you go?! This is why I think he was looking for a new style, a new form but he wasn't sure what he wanted or of how to do this—so you experiment and try things, even if the results aren't perfect. I think each of these plays show his frustration to find a new way to join comic and dramatic elements. *Measure* may be the stronger of the two plays. Angelo is a creepy and undervalued “bad guy” (not as overt as some, but more real). *All's Well* is more difficult to get into, but worth the time and energy. The strength of Helena is balanced by the dweeb, Bertram. Both of these plays also use the difficult to believe “bed trick”. These two plays also end in marriage (the classic ending of comedies) but overall they show a new deep and dark sensibility in Shakespeare. So what do you do when you feel stumped and frustrated—Shakespeare continued to write!



Late Romances (1607-1611):

*Pericles*

*Cymbeline*

*The Winter's Tale*

*The Tempest*

The so-called Late Romances is the direction Shakespeare went with comedy later in life. These are plays of redemption and forgiveness. They are plays that offer a father and husband a second chance. This second chance is usually between a father and daughter but sometimes includes his wife. (*Cymbeline* may be a bit outside this rather simplified formula; it is the play I've had the least exposure to in this group.) *Pericles* is inconsistent, but intriguing. It is an adventure type of a play, shifting from country to country and covering many years. The style is different for Shakespeare, including shorter line lengths which may have been begun by another writer (see section 5). *Winter's Tale* has a strong pastoral feel. The reunion scene at the end of *Winter's Tale* is among the most moving scenes Shakespeare ever wrote. This is also the play with the most famous (or infamous) stage direction in all of Shakespeare: "exit, pursued by a bear"! *Tempest* is the best regarded, the most popular and the most often produced of this group. If Shakespeare was looking for a style or a form in this group of plays, *Tempest* comes closest to bringing these experiments into a comprehensive whole.

#### The Outliers

*The Taming of the Shrew* (1589-1593)

*Shrew* should be with the early comedies. As I said in section 5, this play has too complex of a structure and it is too well carried out for me to believe Shakespeare could have written it as early as it shows up in a chronology of his plays. For many this is a well loved play with a boisterous battle of the sexes; it too is a much despised play for Petruchio's patriarchal and abusive treatment of Kate.

*The Merchant of Venice* (1596-1597)

*Merchant* may actually fill a transition type of space between the early comedies and the high comedies. However, this is not why it is not included above. I have never read or seen this play in relation to it being a comedy. For my playwright's sensibility this play is more of a drama. Therefore I'm not comfortable including it as a comedy, even though it ends as all comedies classically end—in marriage. *Merchant* was originally played as a broad comedy and Shylock was a commedia dell'arte stereo type—a laughing stock type of character. This changed in 1741, when Shylock became the sympathetic character we know today thanks to the actor Charles Macklin.

*The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1600-1601)

From a time-line perspective, *Merry Wives* belongs within the high comedy grouping, but it is anything but a high comedy for my tastes. This play is reported to have been requested by Queen Elizabeth, as she wanted to see Falstaff in love (a contradiction in terms to my thinking). It wouldn't surprise me if the story is apocryphal or if it is true. *Merry Wives* certainly has the refined and whole feel of one of the high comedies. However, the play is a farce and not typical for Shakespeare. It too is the only regular comedy with Falstaff as a character, as the other plays he is in are all histories.

## 11.2. Histories

Shakespeare's history plays are among the earliest plays he wrote. They too are where some signs of the great things to come first presented themselves. When someone mentions Shakespeare's history plays they are talking about plays based upon British royal history, so there is much about British kings and their battles (more often at home than on foreign soil and largely the kings are attempting to keep their crown on their head). There are two tetralogies (groups of four somewhat connected plays, which goes back to the ancient Greeks) and a couple of outliers. Ironically the first tetralogy Shakespeare wrote, should historically follow the second tetralogy. Before I move on, I think it might also be useful and helpful to keep in mind Shakespeare was a dramatist, not a historian. Therefore he will on occasion manipulate things such as time-lines and character's ages when it suits his dramatic needs.

The first tetralogy (1590-1594):

*The Second Part of Henry 6*

*The Third Part of Henry 6*

*The First Part of Henry 6*

*Richard 3*

The ordering of the first three plays is arguable from a few perspectives (the first two plays were each originally presented under a different title; these more convenient titles were added later). The first three plays are all plays of action, mayhem and death, with maybe a touch or two of bombast thrown in for good measure as you might expect from a less experienced playwright. *Richard 3* caps off this group with some decided growth. This play not only has a stronger poetic sensibility, but it offers more solid storytelling (it too has added importance in Elizabethan England, as Henry, Earl of Richmond (the future Henry 7) who defeats Richard at Bosworth Field—is Queen Elizabeth's grandfather). However, Shakespeare's biggest breakthrough with this play is his deeper understanding of characterization. With these changes going on it isn't surprising to learn it is also the first play thought to show some signs of his future greatness. *Richard 3* could also be (and often is) spoken of as being a tragedy.

The second tetralogy (1595-1599):

*Richard 2*

*The First Part of Henry 4*

*The Second Part of Henry 4*

*Henry 5*

It would be easy to argue the first tetralogy wasn't specifically written to be a tetralogy (aside from maybe *Richard 3* to wrap things up). However, this group of plays (also called "The Henriad" despite *Richard 2* being in there) definitely has an awareness of connections between the plays; however, each play is a stand alone play (there too does not seem to be any evidence they were ever performed together or in rep in Shakespeare's day). Shakespeare was clearly a stronger and more capable writer by the time he was writing this significant group of plays. *Richard 2* has a different feel and sensibility than the other three plays, more medieval oriented, but also more consciously poetic. *Richard 2* also has a more classic tragic fall of a king which is largely his own doing (I guess it wouldn't be genuinely tragic, if it wasn't his own doing, but don't tell Aristotle I said that). *Richard 2* is another play that would be a comfortable fit as a tragedy. *The First Part of Henry 4* is one of Shakespeare's first and one of his best experiments in combining comedy and drama. It may be the better of the plays in this group (but I could also argue against this). The last three plays have shared fictional characters, all revolving around Falstaff and his cohorts from the Boar's Head Tavern. These three plays also spring from a single source: the anonymous play, *The Famous Victories of Henry 5*. Shakespeare's rich and full

characterizations allowed him to draw three plays, from one fast-paced, bounce-around-quickly storyline. He also balanced the comedy of Falstaff with the seriousness of battles, honor and Prince Hal's growth as a human being and future king. These last three plays are also not "clean" plays, but are filled with difficult and ambiguous choices, even if they're not always performed this way. (Read them to make up your own mind.) *Richard 2* is also not a "clean" play, but it offers less ambiguous (though not uninteresting) choices for performance. I don't usually approach these plays as histories, but as dramas. There is viable history in there, but for me Shakespeare is a dramatist.

### The Outliers

#### *King John* (1595-1597 or earlier)

It is usually thought *King John* was written from an earlier anonymous play: *The Troublesome Reign of King John*. If nothing else the popularity of the other play may have prompted Shakespeare to write his version (or it could be his main source or as with many of these questions the answer might be somewhere in between). *King John* shows growth as a writer from the first tetralogy, but Shakespeare doesn't seem to be quite up to speed for the second tetralogy just yet for my tastes (the usual ordering between *King John* and *Richard 2* shows conflicting scholarly evidence). It too could simply be as a play topic the story of *Richard 2* had more to offer or Shakespeare understood it better. It could also be he began *King John* earlier but struggled more with it, so he continued to work on it or went back to it at a later time; whereas *Richard 2* may have unfolded more clearly and easily for him.

#### *Henry 8* (1613)

*Henry 8* was co-written with John Fletcher (see section 5). It is best remembered for one performance in 1613 in particular, when a spark from a cannon blast landed on the thatch roof of The Globe and burned the theatre down. From what I remember the usual suspects are there Catherine of Arragon, Wolsey, Cranmer and of course Anne Boleyn. It too seems as if the play wants to look back and remember the "good old days" of Queen Elizabeth's reign as the play ends with her birth.

### 11.3. Tragedies

When I look closely at the order of Shakespeare's tragedies, it almost seems as if he might have been a reluctant tragedian to some degree as this doesn't seem to be something he is aware he will be called to do at some point in his career. Shakespeare was also writing history plays during the early stages of his career and some of these plays had tragic characters or elements, but tragedy wasn't yet a known theatre commodity for him, nor did he know he would become as proficient at it as he did.

Early tragedies (1591-1596):

*Titus Andronicus*

*Richard 3* (see Histories)

*Romeo and Juliet*

*Richard 2* (see Histories)

This group is a mixed bag, as Shakespeare finds his way through the beginnings of tragedy. *Titus* (as I said in section 5) was probably a play by George Peele, which Shakespeare reworked after it was being performed. *Titus* is Shakespeare's first tragedy and is a blood-and-guts-everywhere type of tragedy. *Titus* is an acquired taste for most people—others love it. Shakespeare's classic take on the story of the star-crossed lovers is and always has been popular. *R&J* shows much growth from *Richard 3* in both Shakespeare's characterizations and his storytelling (it is also Shakespeare's bawdiest play). This classic feud between the Capulets and the Montagues implodes through the shared love of the title characters. This play marks a huge step forward as this densely crafted story is something we will see and appreciate more and more throughout the remainder of Shakespeare's career. However, this is not a "classic" tragedy as the tragic fall is by domestic characters, not a king (as in say *Richard 2*).

High tragedies, stage one (1599-1604):

*Julius Caesar*

*Hamlet*

*Othello*

These three plays are all often performed and show Shakespeare in prime form. *Caesar* offers one of the biggest surprises in all of Shakespeare—he kills off the title character in the third act! Caesar is killed by Brutus and a few others; Brutus is noble, the others are not. The first half of the play is spent talking Brutus into joining forces against Caesar; in the second half all of them, including Brutus, are running from Mark Antony—a great dramatic reversal! Many consider *Hamlet* Shakespeare's greatest play, it is easily his most popular. It is a play of deep human questions that lead him (and us) to an extraordinarily deep understanding of humanity and of human death. More people see themselves in Hamlet, than in any other character ever written. The last play in this group, *Othello*, was written a few years later (the plague occasionally closed theatres, including between the writing of *Hamlet* and *Othello*; this happened a few times, usually for a year or two—sound familiar—during Shakespeare's career). Iago is one of Shakespeare's best villains. In wanting revenge upon Othello for passing him over for a promotion—for a promotion—he turns Othello into a jealous fool against his great love, the perfectly innocent, Desdemona. Tragedy as only Shakespeare can bring it to life (and death).

Misplaced or problem plays/tragedies (1601-1605)

*Troilus and Cressida*

*Measure for Measure* (see Comedies)

*All's Well that Ends Well* (see Comedies)

Now I am really going to confuse you (and me too for that matter) as I have not only added in a couple of history plays earlier but now I am going to add in a couple of so-called comedies! This is because I'm sensing something going on with Shakespeare as a writer at this point of his career. I am sensing two strands of the writer—one ending and the other beginning. There is simultaneously the final and perfected stages of one part of Shakespeare as a writer with plays such as *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Twelfth Night* (another comedy), while at the same time he is beginning to struggle with these other “problem plays” that don't clearly fit in well with any play category. There is an abyss he has fallen into as a writer and he will have to get himself out—don't we all! These three problem plays are not connected as tragedies, but I think they belong together because I see them as a transitional stage as Shakespeare was looking for what was coming next. There is something dark in these three plays that seems to be calling Shakespeare; he can feel it and he can sense it, but he doesn't yet know what it is. *T&C* is a play that shows dark and unpleasant sides of humanity. Life during the Trojan War—with no genuine heroes in sight. These three plays reflect for the first time a new type of darkness in Shakespeare's work. This darkness will continue on throughout his remaining tragedies and he will not find a counterbalance for this darkness until he happens upon *Pericles* (see Comedies) and finds the Late Romances.

High tragedies, stage two (1605-1607):

*Macbeth*

*King Lear*

*Antony and Cleopatra*

At this point Shakespeare has found his way through the abyss of the problem plays to what he was looking for. In these last plays he reaches deeper into himself than ever before. *Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth* are ambitious and get slightly carried away—killing the King who is staying for the night. However, they obligingly bring us along on their dark journey inward. *Lear* is the epitome of the powerful fallen to complete powerlessness—a fallen king and the victim of his own blindness all rolled in to one! Shakespeare was also the first person to tell the *Lear* story as a tragedy. Many versions of this romance based history existed, but neither *Lear*, nor *Cordelia* die at this point of the story. It is a great example of how Shakespeare would alter his sources to suit his own storytelling needs. *A&C* is not my favorite play, but many love it. In attempting to hold on to one another *Cleopatra* and *Mark Antony* (the same person who sought *Brutus* in *Caesar*) will betray their cities, their responsibilities and ultimately even themselves. These five characters all die due to their own unique combination of arrogance, ambition, ignorance, stupidity and blindness (*Cordelia* is not one of the five, but she still dies).

### The Outliers

*Timon of Athens* (1604-1605)

There is evidence *Thomas Middleton* wrote parts of this play. *Timon* was a late addition to the First Folio replacing *Troilus and Cressida* (though *T&C* still made it in). Scholars are hesitant to say *Timon* is unfinished; I'm not—*Timon* is an unfinished play by Shakespeare. I think Shakespeare began writing this script and gave up on it (another “*Timon*” play was popular about this time); *Middleton* then gave it a shot and he too gave up on it—I can't prove this, but it's what I think happened. The problem I think Shakespeare had with this play is *Timon's* fall is not tragic, but pathetic (and maybe insipid).

*Coriolanus* (1608)

This is a play about a war hero, cast aside by his home city, who then joins with the arch enemy and returns to lead their attack on his home city! It may be Shakespeare's darkest play for my tastes. It is Shakespeare's most overtly political play and it is a taught piece of writing.

## Recommended Reading

I read much by and about Shakespeare, but if I were going to offer one book for anyone to read to get a better understanding of Shakespeare and how he evolved as a writer throughout his career it is an easy recommendation: *Women of Will*, by Tina Packer. She is not a scholar, but an actor and director.

For individual plays, if you are new to Shakespeare (or not), I recommend The Modern Library Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen edited, RSC Series. The introductions are not overwhelming, they have a useful scene-by-scene breakdown and comments from RSC directors on each play. This is also the most recent full series and is based upon the First Folio's versions of the plays.

For individual plays with overwhelming (or scholarly) introductions, the two series I use most are Arden and Oxford. The editor/s change with nearly every play in both series.