



Shakespeare's Plays

Literature Study Guide Version 3.1

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Shakespeare lived from 1564-1616, during the reigns of **Elizabeth I**, who was Shakespeare's most notable patron, and James I. He was born in **Stratford-upon-Avon**, and is nicknamed the **Bard of Avon**. His plays are generally divided into three categories: comedies end well for their heroes, tragedies end badly, and histories tell fictionalized accounts of the lives of English rulers. Some resources may also describe some plays as "tragicomedies," which have a blended dramatic style. Bolded titles have plot outlines in this sheet.

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Hamlet

Selected characters:

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark	Laertes, Polonius's son
Claudius, his uncle, King of Denmark	Ophelia, Polonius's daughter, a romantic interest of Hamlet
Gertrude, his mother, Queen of Denmark	Horatio, Hamlet's longtime friend and confidante
The Ghost of Old Hamlet, his father	Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet's friends
Polonius, an advisor to King Claudius	Fortinbras, King of Norway

Plot:

Set in **Elsinore Castle, Denmark**. Gertrude and Claudius have married and are ruling Denmark after the death of **Old Hamlet**, the previous king, who was Hamlet's father, Gertrude's husband, and Claudius's brother. **Old Hamlet's ghost** appears to Hamlet, commanding him to get revenge on Claudius, who poisoned Old Hamlet. **Hamlet pretends to be insane** so that he can find out whether this is true without anyone noticing his investigation. Claudius and Gertrude call in Hamlet's old school friends, **Rosencrantz and Guildenstern**, but they fail to discover why Hamlet is mad. A group of traveling actors comes to the castle, and Hamlet asks them to perform a play in which a king's brother kills the king and marries the queen to gain the throne. Convinced by Claudius's reaction to this play that he is guilty of Old Hamlet's murder, Hamlet makes plans to kill his uncle. He confronts Gertrude in her chambers and **stabs Polonius** through a curtain, thinking he's Claudius. Ophelia goes mad due to her father's death and Hamlet's bizarre behavior toward her, and **drowns** after falling out of a willow tree. Claudius convinces Laertes to avenge the deaths of Polonius and Ophelia by dueling Hamlet with a poisoned sword. Claudius also prepares a cup of poisoned wine for the duel, in case the sword fails to kill Hamlet. During the duel, Hamlet and Laertes accidentally switch swords, and **Laertes is killed when the poisoned blade scratches him**. **Gertrude drinks the poisoned wine and dies**. Hamlet, slowly dying after also being scratched with the poisoned sword, kills Claudius and dies. Fortinbras arrives and claims control of Denmark for Norway, and he and Horatio honor the fallen prince.

Romeo and Juliet

Selected characters:

Romeo Montague	Juliet Capulet	Paris, Juliet's fiancé
Mercutio, Romeo's friend	Nurse, Juliet's confidante	
Friar Lawrence	Tybalt, Juliet's cousin	

Plot:

In **Verona**, the **Montagues** and **Capulets** are at war. Juliet is to meet her fiancé, **Paris**, at a ball hosted by the Capulets. Romeo plans to meet the woman he loves, Rosaline, at the same party. Instead, they fall in love with each other. Romeo courts Juliet from under her **balcony** later that night. The next day, they are married by **Friar Lawrence**. Spurred on by his love for Juliet, Romeo attempts to separate **Mercutio** and **Tybalt** during a duel, but **Mercutio is fatally stabbed under Romeo's outstretched arm. Romeo kills Tybalt in revenge**, which Juliet almost immediately forgives. Romeo flees to escape the Capulet clan, who wish to avenge Tybalt's death. Juliet's parents, unaware of her marriage to Romeo, pressure her to marry Paris. To escape this fate, Juliet **drinks a potion** that makes her seem dead, and is lying in her family's tomb when Romeo returns. Not knowing that Juliet is drugged and not dead, Romeo goes to her, killing Paris on the way in, and kills himself with poison over her "body." When she wakes to find Romeo dead, Juliet stabs herself with Romeo's dagger and dies for real this time. Lords Montague and Capulet realize the pain their feud has brought, and agree to promote peace within Verona by erecting a golden statue of Romeo and Juliet.

Julius Caesar

Selected characters:

Julius Caesar	Brutus	Octavius Caesar
Calpurnia, Caesar's wife	Portia, Brutus's wife	
Cassius	Marcus Antonius	

Plot:

Caesar returns from victory over Pompey to much excitement, and ignores a warning from a soothsayer to "**beware the Ides of March.**" Cassius convinces Brutus to kill Caesar by writing fake letters from the Roman populace expressing concern that Julius Caesar will become a dictator and subjugate the will of the people. Against Calpurnia's advice, Caesar makes his way to the senate on the Ides of March, and a group of conspirators, including **Cassius and Brutus, stab him to death.** Caesar's last words are to ask "**Et tu, Brute?**" or "You also, Brutus?" **Brutus gives a speech** to the Roman people explaining his actions, but Marcus Antonius (Mark Antony) gives a response speech. Antony asks, "**Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears**" and sarcastically says that "**Brutus is an honorable man.**" The citizens turn against the conspirators. Marcus Antonius, Octavius Caesar, and Marcus Aemilius Lepidus join forces as a **triumvirate** and fight the conspirators, who all die, at the **Battle of Philippi**, with Brutus **falling on his own sword** in guilt. Marcus Antonius eulogizes the dead Brutus as "**the noblest Roman of them all,**" since he acted for what he felt was best for Rome, rather than from desire for power.

Macbeth

Selected characters:

Macbeth, Thane of Glamis	Banquo, a general	Malcolm and Donalbain, Duncan's sons
Lady Macbeth, Macbeth's wife	Fleance, Banquo's son	
Macduff, a nobleman	Duncan, king of Scotland	

Plot:

Set in **Dunsinane Castle**, Scotland. Returning from war, Macbeth and Banquo meet three witches known as the **Weird Sisters**, who tell Macbeth that he will be made **Thane of Cawdor** and eventually king, and that Banquo's descendents will also rule Scotland. When they reach Dunsinane, Macbeth is indeed made Thane of Cawdor, and Lady Macbeth decides that he must kill King Duncan to gain the throne and fulfill the witches' prophecy. He is conflicted about this, imagining a dagger in front of him ("**is this a dagger which I see before me, / the handle toward my hand?**"), but he does kill Duncan and is made king. Malcolm and Donalbain flee in fear for their lives. To stop Banquo's sons from fulfilling the witches' prophecy by taking over the throne, Macbeth hires murderers to kill Banquo and Fleance, but Fleance escapes. Lady Macbeth is consumed with guilt; she **sleepwalks** while trying to scrub imagined blood from her hands, saying "**out, damned spot!**" Macbeth is warned by the three witches to beware of Macduff, and he arranges for Macduff's family to be killed. Fulfilling two predictions made by the witches, "**Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane**" when Malcolm and Macduff march on the castle, carrying branches from the forest as camouflage, and **Macbeth is killed by a man "not of woman born"** when Macduff, who was delivered by Caesarian section, kills him. Malcolm is made king.

Othello

Selected characters:

Othello, a Moor	Iago, soldier under Othello's command
Desdemona, Othello's wife	Cassio, a lieutenant under Othello's command
Brabantio, Desdemona's father	Roderigo, a rich man, Desdemona's suitor

Plot:

Brabantio accuses Othello of using witchcraft to marry Desdemona, but Othello explains before the Venetian senate that Desdemona was attracted by stories of Othello's life. He sails to Cyprus with Iago, Emilia, Roderigo, and Desdemona. Iago, out of hatred for Othello, schemes to destroy him. He gets Cassio drunk and uses Roderigo to provoke him to violence against the local governor. Othello strips Cassio of his title, and Iago tells Cassio to ask Desdemona for help in getting back into Othello's favor. **Iago suggests to Othello that Cassio and Desdemona's conversations indicate that they are having an affair.** Emilia steals Desdemona's distinctive, **strawberry-embroidered handkerchief**, and Iago makes it seem as though Desdemona gave it to Cassio. Consumed by jealousy, Othello asks Iago to help him get revenge on Cassio and Desdemona. Iago wounds Cassio, and Othello murders Desdemona in her bed. Emilia arrives and discovers what Othello has done, reveals the truth, and is killed by Iago. Iago flees, but is brought back. Othello wounds him, then kills himself. Lodovico announces that Othello's property will be given to Graziano and Iago will be executed.

King Lear

Selected characters:

Lear, King of Britain	Cordelia, Lear's daughter	King of France	Edgar
Goneril, Lear's daughter	Albany, Goneril's husband	Gloucester [GLOSS-tur]	Kent
Regan, Lear's daughter	Cornwall, Regan's husband	Edmund	

Plot:

Lear sets out to **divide his kingdom** between his daughters. He asks them to extol their love for him, which Goneril and Regan, desiring power, readily do. Cordelia, who loves her father dearly, refuses to make flowery speeches that could never measure up to her love for him, and Lear misunderstands. He disowns her, revoking her dowry. Despite her poverty, the **King of France marries Cordelia**. When Kent, Lear's long-time loyal supporter, attempts to defend Cordelia's actions, Lear casts him into exile. Meanwhile, Edmund, the illegitimate son of Gloucester, schemes to gain an inheritance at the expense of his legitimate brother, Edgar. Lear realizes too late that only Cordelia truly loves him. As Cordelia leads the French army in an invasion of Britain, Goneril kills Regan and then kills herself; Edmund dies; Cordelia dies; and Lear dies of grief.

The Merchant of Venice

Selected characters:

Antonio, the titular merchant	Jessica, Shylock's daughter
Bassanio, Antonio's friend	Portia
Shylock, a Jewish money-lender	Nerissa, Portia's maid

Plot:

Portia's late father has set a test for any man who wishes to marry Portia; all suitors must try to find her portrait, which is contained in one of **three caskets (chests), made of gold, silver, and lead**. If they choose correctly, they may marry Portia, but an incorrect choice dooms them to a life without women. Bassanio wishes to marry Portia, but lacks the money to travel to her, so he asks for a loan from Antonio, who in turn asks for a loan from Shylock, despite a long-standing enmity between the two. Shylock agrees to lend Bassanio the money on the understanding that, if it is not repaid at the end of three months, he may take **the pound of Antonio's flesh closest to his heart**. Shylock's daughter, **Jessica, runs off with Lorenzo, a Christian**, with the help of Antonio and Bassanio, which angers Shylock, who is Jewish. When several shipwrecks leave Antonio unable to pay his debt, Shylock demands his pound of flesh. Meanwhile, Bassanio correctly chooses the lead chest and marries Portia, while his friend Gratiano marries Portia's maid, Nerissa. He returns to Venice in time for Antonio's trial against Shylock, at which Portia, **disguised as a young lawyer named Balthasar**, argues that Shylock may not spill any of Antonio's blood while taking his flesh, and must thus forfeit the bond. Shylock is forced to convert to Christianity, effectively destroying his life and livelihood.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Selected characters:

Theseus, Duke of Athens	Titania, queen of the fairies	Helena
Hippolyta, Amazon queen	Puck, a trickster	Demetrius
Oberon, king of the fairies	Hermia	Lycaster

Plot:

Theseus is preparing for his marriage to Hippolyta when Egeus, an Athenian noble, asks him to settle a problem with his daughter, Hermia. **Hermia loves Lysander** and wishes to marry him, but Egeus wants Hermia to marry Demetrius. Helena, Hermia's friend and a former love of Demetrius's, tells Demetrius of Hermia's plan to run away with Lysander. Demetrius follows Lysander and Hermia into the forest, and Helena follows him. A group of **fairies, led by Oberon and Titania**, are in this forest, traveling to bless Theseus's marriage and arguing over a beautiful young Indian boy, who Oberon wishes to make a knight. Hoping to make Titania appreciate the boy's beauty, he asks Puck to spread a love potion on Titania's sleeping eyelids so that she will fall in love with the first person she sees when she wakes. He also orders Puck to spread some on Demetrius's eyelids to make him fall in love with Helena. Puck mistakenly spreads the potion on Lysander's eyelids, and **Lysander falls in love with Helena**. Chaos ensues as Puck attempts to rectify his mistake. Meanwhile, **Titania awakes and falls in love with Bottom, a buffoonish Athenian with the head of a donkey**. Eventually, everything is sorted out. Theseus and Hippolyta find the young lovers and take them back to Athens, where **Demetrius marries Helena and Lysander marries Hermia**. A group of craftsmen come out of the forest to perform a play after the wedding. Finally, Puck asks the audience to imagine that the play was simply a dream.

The Tempest

Selected characters:

Prospero, a wizard	Alonso, the King of Naples
Miranda, Prospero's daughter	Ferdinand, Alonso's son
Ariel, Prospero's familiar	Antonio, Prospero's brother
Caliban, another of Prospero's servants	

Plot:

A ship containing Alonso, Ferdinand, Sebastian, Antonio, Gonzalo, Stephano, and Trinculo is wrecked near **Prospero's island**. Prospero reveals to Miranda that he sank the ship to get revenge on Alonso and Antonio; Prospero had been the Duke of Milan until Alonso and Antonio left him and his daughter on a raft to die. Ariel appears and tells Prospero that the passengers on the ship have been brought to the island and separated into groups. **Ferdinand and Miranda fall in love**, but Prospero separates them to slow down their relationship. Meanwhile, Ariel makes a group of noblemen, including Alonso, go to sleep. **Antonio and Sebastian plot to kill him**, but Ariel makes him wake up before the plot can come to fruition. Prospero makes Ferdinand work for him, and Ferdinand and Miranda agree to marry. **Stephano, Trinculo, and Caliban get drunk** and plan to kill Prospero to take over the island. Prospero and Ariel trick everyone on the island to Prospero's home and diffuse all of the plans they've made to kill Alonso and Prospero. Prospero reveals Ferdinand and Miranda and tells everyone his story. He is reinstated as a duke and plans to return to Milan. He releases Ariel from his servitude, asking him to keep the seas calm for the group's return to Italy.

Much Ado About Nothing

Selected characters:

Leonato, a nobleman of Messina	Claudio
Hero, Leonato's daughter	Don Pedro
Beatrice, Leonato's niece	Don John the bastard, Don Pedro's illegitimate brother
Benedick	

Plot:

Don Pedro returns from war to Leonato's home with Don John, Benedick, and Claudio. **Claudio and Hero** fall in love, and **Benedick and Beatrice** engage in a battle of witty banter. Claudio and Hero conspire to make Benedick and Beatrice fall in love. Their plan succeeds, though the pair refuse to admit their love to each other. Meanwhile, Don John makes Hero's maid dress up like Hero and accept the romantic advances of Borachio at Hero's window, which causes Claudio to reject Hero at the altar. Leonato pretends that Hero has died of shock, and when the local police discover that she is innocent of infidelity, Claudio mourns his loss. Beatrice and Benedick admit their love, and Claudio is convinced to marry Leonato's "niece," who is supposedly nearly identical to Hero. At the double wedding, Hero reveals that she is Leonato's "niece," and the overjoyed couples dance happily.