

Divisions of Shakespeare's plays

- Phase 1 From the late 1580s to 1594, Shakespeare experimented with different kinds of comedy in *Love's Labour's Lost*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*. He began to explore English history in his first 'tetralogy' (a linked sequence of four plays) comprising *Henry VI* (in 3 parts) with *Richard III*. *Titus Andronicus* was his first tragedy.
- Phase 2 From 1594 to 1599 Shakespeare continued to concentrate on comedies and histories. The comedies of this period – *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, and *Much Ado About Nothing* – are mainly in his best-loved 'romantic' vein, while his fuller command of histories appears in the second tetralogy: *Richard II*, *Henry IV* (2 parts), and *Henry V*. This second period also includes the historical *King John* and a sentimental tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*.
- Phase 3 In the third period, from 1599 to 1608, Shakespeare abandoned romantic comedy (except for *Twelfth Night*) and English history, working instead on tragedies and on the disturbing 'dark' comedies or 'problem plays' *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well that Ends Well*, and *Troilus and Cressida*. The tragedies usually regarded as the four greatest are *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello*, although a second group of tragic 'Roman plays' includes the equally powerful *Antony and Cleopatra*, along with *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*. To this period also belongs the tragedy *Timon of Athens*, possibly written with Middleton.
- Phase 4 Shakespeare's final phase, from 1608 to 1613, is dominated by a new style of comedy on themes of loss and reconciliation: *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest* are known as his late 'romances'. Shakespeare seems to have interrupted his retirement in 1613 to collaborate with John Fletcher in *Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. Most of the fictional stories in Shakespeare's plays were adapted from earlier plays and romances, while his historical dramas are derived from Plutarch's biographies of Roman statesmen and from Holinshed's rather slanted account of English history, the *Chronicles* (1577).

List of plays with synopses (in alphabetical order)

- 1) All's Well that Ends Well
- 2) Antony and Cleopatra
- 3) As You Like It
- 4) Comedy of Errors, The
- 5) Coriolanus
- 6) Cymbeline
- 7) Hamlet
- 8, 9) Henry IV, Parts I and II
- 10) Henry V
- 11-13) Henry VI, Parts I, II and III
- 14) Henry VIII
- 15) Julius Caesar
- 16) King John
- 17) King Lear
- 18) Love's Labour's Lost
- 19) Macbeth
- 20) Measure for Measure
- 21) Merchant of Venice
- 22) Merry Wives of Windsor, The
- 23) Midsummer's Night Dream, A
- 24) Much Ado About Nothing
- 25) Othello
- 26) Pericles
- 27) Richard II
- 28) Richard III
- 29) Romeo and Juliet
- 30) Taming of the Shrew, The
- 31) Tempest, The
- 32) Timon of Athens
- 33) Titus Andronicus
- 34) Troilus and Cressida
- 35) Twelfth Night
- 36) Two Noble Kinsmen
- 37) Two Gentlemen of Verona
- 38) Winter's Tale, A

1) All's well that ends well

Bertram is summoned to the court of the King of France in Paris. Helena, daughter of a famous physician, uses the King's incurable illness as an excuse to follow Bertram, with whom she is in love. Using her father's secret prescription, she wagers her own life that the King will recover within 24 hours. He is cured, and as a reward allows Helena to choose a husband from the noblemen at the court. She picks Bertram, who is ordered to marry her. He runs away to war in Italy before their marriage is consummated, refusing to

acknowledge Helena as his wife until she has his ring and is carrying his child. Helena becomes a pilgrim in Florence.

Helena chances upon Bertram wooing Diana. She changes places with Diana in the night, so that Bertram makes love to his wife instead of his lover. Helena and Bertram exchange rings. Back in France, Bertram is engaged to Lord Lafew's daughter, and gives her Helena's ring. Thought to have murdered his former wife and stolen her ring, he is only saved by Helena's timely reappearance.

Possibly written in 1598, but some commentators suggest 1603 / 1604 because of similarities to *Measure for Measure*.

2) **Antony and Cleopatra**

Mark Antony, war hero and ruler of the entire Roman Empire with drunkard Lepidus and officious Octavius, is bewitched by the beautiful Queen Cleopatra in Egypt. Torn back to the realities of Roman life by political intrigue and the death of his wife Fulvia, Antony cynically secures a pact with Octavius by marrying his sister Octavia. Soon afterwards, the allure of Cleopatra and their luxurious life in Egypt draws him back.

In the ensuing war, Antony's uncharacteristic lack of judgement and Cleopatra's panic give the victory to Octavius. Tricked by Cleopatra, Antony believes she is dead and falls on his sword. Discovering she is still alive, Antony is carried to her and dies in her arms. With Antony gone, and unwilling to be part of an ignominious parade of captives in Rome, Cleopatra dresses herself in her royal finery and presses a poisonous asp to her bared breast.

Probably written in 1606 / 1607.

3) **As you like it**

Rosalind escapes from her uncle, the usurper Duke Frederick, with her cousin Celia and Touchstone, the court jester. Orlando, who loves Rosalind, flees the duchy to evade his murderous brother Oliver. In the forest of Arden, Duke Senior and his court (with the exception of the jaundiced philosopher Jaques) enjoy life among the courting shepherds. Orlando is discovered hanging love poems on trees by Rosalind, who is disguised as Celia's brother "Ganymede". To curb Orlando of his lovesickness, "Ganymede" pretends to be Rosalind to allow Orlando to practise courting. Setting their differences aside, Orlando saves his brother from a lion, Oliver and Celia fall in love, while Touchstone furiously courts Audrey, a simple country girl. Orlando tells "Ganymede" he can bear the pretended courtship no longer, and "Ganymede" promises to summon Rosalind by magic to Oliver and Celia a wedding. She warns Phebe, who has fallen in love with "Ganymede", that as "Ganymede" will never marry a woman, Phebe should be content with her shepherd lover Silvius. Rosalind then reveals her true identity and marries Orlando. Duke Frederick is converted by a holy man and retires to a monastery, where Jaques joins him.

Registered in 1599, but possibly written earlier.

4) **The comedy of errors**

Egeon, a merchant, loses his wife and one of his infant twins in a shipwreck. His remaining son Antipholus sets out to find his brother, accompanied by Dromio, a servant who also lost his twin in the wreck. Egeon follows Antipholus to Ephesus, only to discover that as a stranger his life is forfeit unless he pays a huge ransom. The lost son

(also named Antipholus) has settled in Ephesus, married Adriana and taken Dromio's lost brother (also named Dromio) into his service. Both sets of brothers get hopelessly mixed up. The Antipholuses are arrested and thought mad, and the Dromios are repeatedly beaten unjustly. Antipholus of Ephesus, so enraged he has to be restrained, is carried off home. Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse appear and everyone runs away from them, believing the Ephesians have escaped and are seeking revenge. The Syracusans then flee into the Priory. The Duke arrives with Egeon, who is about to be beheaded. Ephesian Antipholus and Dromio escape, and the Abbess arrives with the other Antipholus and Dromio. In the general amazement at the meeting of both sets of twins, the Abbess recognizes Egeon as her long lost husband.

Possibly written as early as 1590, performed at Gray's Inn in 1594.

5) **Coriolanus**

The Roman general Caius Marcius honoured with the surname Coriolanus after his outstanding victory against the Volscians is nominated for consul on a wave of public acclaim. Unwilling to conceal his contempt for the ordinary citizens of Rome, he alienates his supporters and is exiled. Joining his enemy, the Volscian leader ruling Tullius Aufidius, he raises an army against Rome. At the walls of the city, he is met by old friends who sue for peace but are rebuffed. Eventually the Romans send his mother Volumnia, his gentle wife Virgilia and his son to plead with him. Aware that it is likely to mean his death, he nonetheless signs a peace treaty that secures good terms for a Volscian retreat. Back in the Volscian camp at Antium he is accused of treachery by Tullius Aufidius and executed.

Probably Shakespeare's last tragedy, written in about 1608.

6) **Cymbeline**

Imogen, daughter of Cymbeline, King of Britain, marries the commoner Posthumus in secret instead of her stepbrother, Cloten. The queen, Cloten's mother, has Posthumus banished to Rome, where he wagers Iachimo his ring that Imogen will remain faithful. Iachimo convinces Posthumus that he has seduced her, and wins the ring. Posthumus orders his servant to kill Imogen, but the servant, believing in Imogen's fidelity, helps her to escape. Imogen disguises herself as a page ("Fidele") and escapes to a Welsh cave with Belarius and Cymbeline's lost sons, Guiderius and Arviragus. Fidele falls ill and is left for dead, only to recover next to Cloten's headless body, whom she mistakes for her husband.

Captured by the Roman invasion force, Fidele enters Lucius's service, and is nearly executed by Cymbeline after Belarius and a disguised Posthumus defeat her new master. Posthumus, mistaken for a Roman soldier, is also imprisoned. Her life spared by Lucius's intercession, Imogen uncovers Iachimo's plot. Posthumus realizes that his wife, whom he feared dead, did not betray him, and Cymbeline is reunited with his daughter and his lost sons.

Possibly written 1609 / 1610, performed at the Globe Theatre in April 1611.

7) **Hamlet**

Hamlet, profoundly upset by the death of his father and his mother's hasty re-marriage to his uncle Claudius, sees his father's ghost. The ghost accuses Claudius of murder, and calls for revenge. Hamlet pretends to be mad. Polonius, the king's Lord Chamberlain,

thinks the prince is lovesick for his daughter, Ophelia, until Hamlet violently rejects her, shouting “Get thee to a nunnery”. Convinced of Claudius’s guilt when the king stops a performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*, Hamlet still procrastinates. Then in Queen Gertrude’s bedchamber, mistaking Polonius for the king, the prince kills him. Banished to England, Hamlet discovers Claudius has ordered his execution. With uncharacteristic decisiveness, he escapes back to Denmark.

Ophelia has gone insane and drowned herself. Claudius and Laertes, Polonius’s son, plans a fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes (who will carry a poisoned foil). The prince accepts the challenge. Winning the first bout, Hamlet is offered poisoned wine but declines, Gertrude drinks instead. Laertes hits Hamlet, loses his foil, and is struck with the poisoned tip himself. As the queen dies, Laertes reveals the king’s plot. Hamlet stabs Claudius with Laertes’s foil, and forces him to drink the wine. Laertes and Hamlet are reconciled, then die.

First version written around 1599, completed in 1601, registered as having been performed in July 1602.

8-9) Henry IV, Parts I and II

The *Henry IV* play is centred not on the ailing Henry IV, but on his son, Prince Hal. Throughout *Part I* the dissipated Hal is contrasted with the impulsive rebel Hotspur (Henry Percy), son of the Earl of Northumberland, who has just returned from victories in Scotland. While insurgents gather around Hotspur, Hal drinks and brawls with Falstaff and his cronies in a tavern, the Boar’s Head at Eastcheap. After stealing the proceeds of a highway robbery from Falstaff (who later constructs wonderful tales of his misfortune), the prince is summoned to oppose the Percys at Shrewsbury, where he valiantly defeats Hotspur in single combat. Falstaff, feigning death for most of the battle, then stabs the corpse and claims he killed Hotspur himself.

In *Part II*, Henry IV is dying. Falstaff gleefully involves himself in corrupt army recruitment, while Hal’s brother Prince John puts down the continuing revolt. Henry is reconciled to his reformed son on his deathbed, and Hal is crowned Henry V. In keeping with his new status, Hal harshly dismisses the eager Falstaff from his coronation with a meagre pension.

Written and performed around 1597, part of a historical tetralogy starting with *Richard II* and ending with *Henry V*.

10) Henry V

To the surprise of his courtiers, the riotous Prince Hal, now crowned as King Henry V, has become a noble statesman overnight. He promptly arrests three traitors and, taunted by a gift of tennis balls from the Dauphin, lays claim to the French throne under Salic law and invades France. The outnumbered English capture the town of Harfleur and again beat the French against overwhelming odds at Agincourt, after Henry delivers a rousing speech “Cry ‘God for Harry, England, and St George!’”.

Henry V is not just an account of the doughtiness of the English in time of war. With Falstaff a reported death early in the play, and informal scenes of the soldiers’ life in priap (the disguised king passes among his fearful troops before Agincourt), the jingoistic rhetoric is given a sombre hue. The play finishes not in the thunder of battle, but with the comedy of awkward love. Henry, who speaks no French, is left to court Princess Katherine, who speaks only French, aware that their marriage would finalize a peace.

agreement. The Chorus closes the play with a reminder that Henry V's death precipitated the Wars of the Roses.

Probably written in the spring or summer of 1599, most famous as a symbol of popular nationalism after the wartime film version by Laurence Olivier (1944) the last part of the *Henry IV* tetralogy.

11-13) Henry VI, Parts I, II and III

The three parts of *Henry VI* cover more than 60 years of the Wars of the Roses from the death of Henry V in 1422 almost up to the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485. *Part I* deals with the wars in France where the valiant Talbot is locked in combat with Joan of Arc (*La Pucelle*), finally perishing with his son near Bordeaux. The play ends with Henry VI's marriage to Margaret of Anjou, the daughter of the King of Naples, engineered by the Earl of Suffolk to further his own political aims.

Parts II and III reveal Henry VI as a weak and ineffective king, under whose rule England collapses into civil war through Cade's Rebellion and the intense rivalry of the nobles. It also charts the rise to power and subsequent murder of Richard, Duke of York. Henry is captured and Edward IV becomes king, ensuring the Yorkist succession by his victories at Barnet and Tewkesbury. Richard, Duke of Gloucester (later King Richard III) murders Henry VI in the Tower.

Written between 1590 and 1592, originally believed to be the work of another playwright, but now generally attributed to Shakespeare himself, part of an historical tetralogy that finishes with *Richard III*.

14) Henry VIII

Henry, tricked by a malign Cardinal Wolsey, executes the innocent and forgiving Duke of Buckingham. Worrying that he has sinned in marrying his brother's widow, Katherine of Aragon, Henry fears he will be graced with no heirs. Meeting Anne Bullen (Boleyn), a virtuous Protestant, Henry falls in love and decides to divorce Katherine and marry Anne. By chance, Henry also uncovers Wolsey's corrupt financial dealings, and, realizing the Cardinal opposes his marriage to Anne, punishes him, although he spares his life. Now relying on the Protestant Archbishop Thomas Cranmer as his chief adviser, Henry protects him from the villainous Bishop Gardiner. The play ends with the birth and christening of Anne's daughter, with Cranmer looking forward to her glorious reign as Elizabeth I.

Also known as *Half is true*, probably half written by John Fletcher in 1613, a performance in April of that year caused the Globe Theatre fire.

15) Julius Caesar

Fearing Julius Caesar will become a popular tyrant, Brutus and Cassius plot to assassinate him. On the day agreed for the assassination, Caesar is nearly persuaded to stay at home by his wife Calphurnia's fateful dreams. He decides to go to the Senate, ignoring a soothsayer's warning and a letter that names all the conspirators, and is stabbed. Brutus calms the crowd attending Caesar's funeral and spares Mark Antony, Caesar's trusted companion, who then makes a speech that stirs up the crowd against the assassins. Antony makes a pact with Octavius and Lapidus to seize control of the Roman Empire while the mob riot and burn the conspirators' houses, and Brutus and Cassius flee to raise an army.

Overruling Cassius, Brutus decides to march against Antony and Octavius and into a weaker position at Philippi. He attacks Octavius and wins, but Cassius panics, mistaking friendly forces for his foes, and orders his servant to kill him. Cursed by the ghost of Caesar, the battle turns against Brutus, who runs onto his sword.

Probably written and performed 1599.

16) **King John**

King Philip of France demands that King John surrender the throne of England to his nephew, Arthur. John invades France, accompanied by Philip Faulconbridge, Richard I's illegitimate son. At Angiers, the French king, his son Lewis, and the Archduke of Austria oppose John. A marriage is proposed between Lewis and John's Spanish niece Blanche, under the terms of which Philip recognizes King John's rule in England, and John cedes some territory to France. However, John is then excommunicated over a dispute between the pope and the archbishop of Canterbury, and Philip forced to take up arms against him. John is victorious, capturing Arthur, Faulconbridge decapitates the Archduke and returns home to loot the monasteries. John gives an order to have Arthur's eyes burned out, but his wishes are not carried out. The outraged nobles suspect murder when Arthur falls from a high wall trying to escape from the castle. As John attempts to reconcile himself with the pope, his nobles desert to Lewis. Suffering from a fever, John retreats to Swinstead Abbey, the French reinforcements are lost at sea, their army retreats, and the disaffected nobles, hearing that Lewis plans to execute them after the battle, rally to their dying king.

Date uncertain, but most likely between 1591 and 1598.

17) **King Lear**

Old King Lear rashly decides to divide his kingdom between his three daughters Goneril, Regan, and his favourite and youngest daughter, Cordelia. Goneril and Regan make exaggerated declarations of love for Lear, but Cordelia refuses to flatter him. She is disinherited and given in marriage to the King of France without a dowry. Lear then divides his kingdom equally between Goneril and Regan, but is thrown out on to the moor in the middle of a raging storm with only the Fool for company. The Earl of Gloucester, turned against his faithful son Edgar by the cunning slanders of his illegitimate son Edmund, is blinded by Goneril's husband Cornwall. Edgar, disguised as the madman Tom of Bedlam, rescues Gloucester, while Lear, mad with grief and anger, is led to Cordelia in the French army camp at Dover.

After squabbling over Edmund's affection, Goneril poisons Regan, then takes her own life. The French are defeated by the English army under Edmund and Albany (Goneril's husband). Lear and Cordelia are captured, and Cordelia hanged on Edmund's orders. Edmund, mortally wounded by Edgar, repents too late, and Lear, finally broken by grief, dies with Cordelia's body in his arms.

Written between 1604 and 1606, performed at Court in 1606.

18) **Love's labour's lost**

The King of Navarre orders that his court forego female company for three years, and dedicate themselves to study. Longaville and Dumaine readily agree, but Berowne reminds them that the Princess of France is expected at the court. She arrives with three ladies in waiting. Maria who admires Longaville, Katharine who prefers Dumaine, and

Rosaline who loves Berowne. They are asked to stay in tents outside the court, and the king is berated by the princess for his poor hospitality. Berowne writes Rosaline a love letter that falls into the hands of the king. Meanwhile, Berowne overhears the king, Dumaine and Longaville reciting love poems for their beloveds. Berowne pretends he has not broken his oath, but when shown his letter to Rosaline, confesses his love and persuades the king to revoke his decree. Courting the ladies disguised as a delegation of Russians, each suitor is tricked into professing his love to the wrong woman. Suddenly it is announced that the king of France is dead. The teasing stops and each suitor (including the king himself) is required to undergo some form of monastic discipline for a year until his beloved returns from France.

Probably written and performed about 1595.

19) **Macbeth**

Returning from battle, Macbeth and Banquo meet three witches who tell them their future. The first part of the prophecy comes true. Macbeth is made Thane of Cawder by King Duncan. Emboldened by Lady Macbeth, the new Thane takes the second part of the prophecy into his own hands, murdering Duncan (who is staying with Macbeth at Dunsinane) and crowning himself king of Scotland. Remembering that the witches also predicted Banquo would be the father of kings, though never one himself, Macbeth orders him and his son George be killed. Banquo is slain but Fleance survives.

Haunted by Banquo's ghost, Macbeth returns to the witches. They warn him against Macduff but also tell him no man 'of woman born' shall kill him and he cannot be defeated until Burnam Wood comes to Dunsinane. Hearing that Duncan's son, Malcolm, has joined forces with Macduff, Macbeth kills Macduff's wife and children. Lady Macbeth goes mad with guilt and dies. Meanwhile, Macbeth's enemies close in on him at Dunsinane, covered with branches cut out from Burnam Wood. Macbeth is slain by Macduff who reveals he was not born naturally but from his mother's womb untimely ripped. Malcolm a declared king.

Probably written and first performed at the Globe in 1606.

20) **Measure for measure**

Vincentio, Duke of Vienna, surrenders his power to the puritanical deputy, Angelo, and an old councillor, Escalus, hoping to reform his corrupt state without having to play the tyrant himself. Claudio has been arrested for getting Juliet, to whom he is betrothed, pregnant. His irrepressible friend Lucio summons Claudio's sister Isabella from her nunnery to plead with Angelo for mercy. Instead, Angelo proposes she have sex with him in exchange for her brother's life. She refuses, and is furious when Claudio tries to persuade her. The Duke, disguised as a friar, intervenes: Mariana, who had been abandoned by Angelo, takes Isabella's place. Angelo secretly brings forward the execution of Claudio. The friar saves him by substituting another prisoner's head for Claudio's.

The Duke reappears to hear the people's grievances in public. Angelo's crimes are exposed and he is married to Mariana. Claudio is freed to wed Juliet, Isabella accepts the Duke's hand, and Lucio is forced to marry his mistress in penance for the lewd actions he unwittingly confessed while slandering the 'absent' Duke to a disguised Vincentio.

Probably written in the summer of 1604.

21) **Merchant of Venice**

Bassanio asks for a loan from his friend, Antonio, to help him woo the rich heiress Portia. They go to the Jewish moneylender Shylock, despite Antonio's contempt for Jews. Shylock offers the loan interest-free for three months, but asks for a pound of flesh as security. Antonio agrees.

Portia is to marry the suitor who correctly chooses from three baskets (gold, silver, and lead) the one which contains her picture, the suitor who chooses wrongly must pledge he will never marry. The Princes of Morocco and Arragon seek Portia's hand. Morocco wishes "to gain what many men desire" (gold), Arragon selects "as much as he deserves" (silver), but Bassanio decides "to give and hazard all he hath" (lead) and finds the portrait. Meanwhile, Antonio has been bankrupted, all his money invested in a wrecked ship. Deserted by his daughter and his servant, Shylock vows he will be revenged and demands his pound of flesh from Antonio. Portia offers to pay Antonio's debt, but Shylock refuses. Pretending to be a lawyer, she awards Shylock his pound of flesh on condition he take it without drawing blood. He is accused of attempted murder, and half his possessions are confiscated.

Probably written between 1594 and 1598.

22) **The merry wives of Windsor**

Falstaff, the jovial antihero of *Henry IV* (popularly thought to have been revived for this play at Queen Elizabeth's personal request), deludes himself into thinking that Mistress Page and Mistress Ford are in love with him, and writes identical love letters to them. His dismissed servants immediately tell their husbands of Falstaff's plot. Mistress Page's daughter, Anne Page, is being courted by shy Slender, the French doctor Caius, and the young aristocrat Fenton. Ford, in disguise, pays Falstaff to seduce his wife. When Ford tries to catch them together, Falstaff hides in a laundry basket, and is dumped in a muddy ditch; a second time Falstaff, disguised as the old woman of Brainford, is beaten from the house by Ford himself. Finally Falstaff is tricked into dressing up as Herne the Hunter and is pinched and burnt by children disguised as elves and fairies, led by Anne Page, while the adults mock him in his distress. Caius and Slender both try to snatch Anne, but she is saved by Fenton and they elope together. A chastened Falstaff is invited to the celebrations.

Possibly written for George Carey's investiture as a knight of the Garter on April 23, 1597.

23) **A midsummer's night dream**

Theseus, Duke of Athens, and Hippolyta are to be wed. Egeus's daughter, Hermia, refuses to marry Demetrius (the suitor her father has chosen for her) because she loves Lysander. Theseus reluctantly invokes a law against Hermia that forces her to obey her father on pain of death or banishment to a nunnery. Lysander and Hermia meet in the forest, planning to elope. Helena (Hermia's friend) tells Demetrius, hoping to regain his love.

In the forest, Oberon, King of the Fairies, has his servant Puck bewitch his queen Titania, with whom he has quarrelled, to fall in love with the first living thing she sees, hearing Demetrius reject Helena, he tries the same magic but charms Lysander by accident. Lysander sees Helena and falls in love, forgetting Hermia. An artisan, Bottom,

is rehearsing a play in the wood, Puck turns his head into an ass's head. Titania sees him and falls in love.

Attempting to correct his earlier mistake, Puck charms Demetrius, but when all of the lovers meet, they come to blows. Oberon and Puck separate them in a magical fog and bring Lysander and Titania back to normal. Theseus, Hippolyta, and Egeus discover the lovers, Egeus demands that Lysander be executed. Demetrius intervenes, declaring his new love for Helena. The three couples are wed. The play ends with a riotous performance of the tragedy of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, given by Bottom and his fellow tradesmen

Probably written about 1595 / 1596, and first performed for a courtly wedding.

24) Much ado about nothing

Don Pedro, Prince of Aragon, his illegitimate brother Don John, his friend Claudio, and a courtier Benedick, visit Leonato, governor of Messina. Claudio falls desperately in love with Leonato's daughter Hero. Benedick tells Don Pedro, who courts Hero on Claudio's behalf at the Mosque that evening. Overheard by a servant, Don Pedro is believed to want Hero for himself. The malicious Don John tells Claudio that Don Pedro is in love with Hero. Don Pedro explains himself, and a marriage is arranged for Claudio.

Don Pedro, Claudio, and Leonato persuade the sardonic Benedick that Beatrice loves him. Hero lets Beatrice overhear talk of Benedick's passion for her. Meanwhile, Don John persuades Hero's waiting woman, Margaret, to impersonate her mistress and let Domino into her bedroom through a window. Claudio assumes Hero is having an affair and announces her infidelity at their wedding. Hero faints. Thinking Hero is dead, Claudio is betrothed to her cousin as penance.

Domino is arrested by the ludicrous constable Dogberry and confesses. Don John flees. At the church the veiled cousin is revealed as Hero herself, and Benedick and Beatrice, after one last round of jibes, pledge their troth.

Probably written in 1598 / 1599.

25) Othello

Othello, a Moor, is accused of stealing Brabantio's daughter Desdemona, but the Senate approves their marriage and appoints Othello to lead the Venetian army in Cyprus against the Turks. Promoting Cassio to lieutenant for his help in the courtship of Desdemona, Othello ignores Iago's claim to the post. Iago persuades Roderigo, an unsuccessful suitor of Desdemona, to fight the happily drunken Cassio, who is discharged. Iago then befriends Cassio and has him beg Desdemona to plead for him with Othello. At the same time Iago warns Othello that Cassio is having an affair with his wife. Brilliantly manipulating Othello's jealousy and rising anger, Iago has his wife, Desdemona's serving woman Emilia, steal a handkerchief Othello gave his bride at their wedding, and plants it on Cassio. Convinced of her infidelity, Othello smothers his beloved wife in their marriage bed Iago then kills Roderigo (for failing to murder Cassio) and Emilia. But he's too late: Emilia has already proven Iago's guilt and Desdemona's innocence to Othello. Othello stabs Iago (who's now under arrest), but fails to kill him, and commits suicide.

Written 1602 / 1604, first performed for James I at Whitehall in 1604.

26) Pericles

John Gower, on whose poem *Confessio Amantis* the story is based, presents the play. Pericles solves the riddle of King Antiochus's incestuous relationship with his daughter, and flees. He survives a shipwreck, and wins the hand of King Simonide's daughter Thaisa. Hearing that Antiochus is dead, Pericles sails for Tyre with his new wife. In a storm, Thaisa gives birth to Marina, faints and is believed dead. Her burial basket is washed to Ephesus where the physician Cerimon revives her. Fearing her husband is dead, she becomes a priestess of the goddess Diana.

Pericles leaves Marina at Tarsus, a city which he had saved from famine, with Cleon and his wife Dionyza. Fearing rivalry with her own daughter, Dionyza tries to kill Marina, but Marina is captured by pirates and sold to a Myteline brothel. There, the governor Lysimachus, recognizes her virtue and releases her. Summoned to Tarsus by a vision of the false tomb Cleon and Dionyza built for Marina, Pericles stops by chance in Mytilene and he and Marina are reunited. Ecstatic, he sees Diana calling him to Ephesus, where he and Marina find Thaisa. Cleon and Dionyza are burnt to death by the people of Tarsus for their crimes.

Written between 1606 and 1608, probably in collaboration with John Day and Thomas Heywood for the first two acts.

27) Richard II

Thomas Mowbray defends himself against Henry Bolingbroke's charges of treason by calling for trial by combat. Fearing Bolingbroke's popularity, King Richard banishes them both, then departs for Ireland to quell a rebellion. Short of funds, the king resorts to dubious means to finance his campaign, confiscating the estate of John of Gaunt (Bolingbroke's dead father). Bolingbroke gathers an invasion force to reclaim his lands. The Duke of York, left as regent without money or an army, goes to meet Bolingbroke. Fearing Richard is dead in Ireland, his supporters fall away, Richard begins to suffer bouts of depression and, when he hears York has joined Bolingbroke, surrenders to his fate. Despite warnings of civil war, Bolingbroke accepts the crown from the imprisoned Richard and banishes the queen to France. Believing the new king wants Richard dead, Sir Pierce of Exton murders him. He is rebuked by Bolingbroke when he arrives at the court with the coffin, and Bolingbroke (now Henry IV) resolves to go on a Crusade to atone for the murder.

Probably written and first performed in 1595.

28) Richard III

The lame hunchback Richard, Duke of Gloucester, convinces the dying Edward IV that the Duke of Clarence is treasonous. Gloucester pretends to be on Clarence's side, but has him stabbed and drowned in a barrel of Malmsey wine. He woos Lady Anne at the funeral of her father-in-law Henry VI, whom Gloucester helped to murder, by claiming he also murdered her husband but out of love for her. Captivated, she marries him. Gloucester and Buckingham capture the young Prince of Wales and his brother, the Duke of York, and lock them in the Tower of London. Gloucester is crowned as King Richard II and persuades Tyrell to murder the princes. Armies are raised against Richard by Buckingham and the Earl of Richmond, but when Richmond's fleet is scattered, Buckingham is caught and executed. After a night of ghostly visitations that confront Richard with his guilt and promise Richmond the victory, battle is joined at Bosworth

Field. Richard and Richmond meet in single combat, and Richard is killed. Richmond is crowned Henry VII on the battlefield, and vows to unite the country.

Probably written and first performed in 1593.

29) Romeo and Juliet

The Montgues and the Capulets are the two most important families in Verona. Romeo is a Montague, but Juliet is a Capulet, and their families are involved in a bitter feud. Romeo loves chaste Rosaline. Discovering Rosaline has been invited to a Capulet banquet, Romeo attends in disguise, but falls in love with Juliet. They kiss, initially not realizing their families are enemies, they exchange professions of love at Juliet's open window, they meet in secret and decide to wed. Romeo encounters Tybalt and an exchange of insults escalates into a brawl. Mercutio, Romeo's friend is mortally wounded by Tybalt. Romeo kills Tybalt then flees to Mantua.

Capulet orders Juliet to marry Paris within three days. She feigns suicide, so that she and Romeo can meet in the family crypt and elope. In Mantua, Romeo hears of Juliet's death. Not receiving a letter of explanation from Friar Laurence, who married them and helped them to escape, Romeo believes that Juliet is truly dead and resolves to die beside her. He is seen breaking into the Capulet crypt by Paris. They fight beside Juliet's body and Paris is killed. Romeo drinks poison and dies. Laurence comes to wake Juliet, and discovers the carnage. Juliet grabs Romeo's dagger, kisses him, and kills herself.

Probably written 1595.

30) The Taming of the Shrew

Baptista, Kate's father, will not allow his gentle younger daughter Bianca to marry until the fiery Kate is wed. Petruchio arrives, looking for a wife. Hortensio, disguised as a music teacher, and Lucentio, as a language tutor, secretly court Bianca. Petruchio pretends Kate's insults and blows are affectionate and asks for Kate's hand. Baptista agrees and offers Bianca to the wealthiest suitor. Tranio (pretending to be his master Lucentio) outbids the other suitors, while Bianca accepts the real Lucentio's suit. Hortensio leaves to marry an enthusiastic widow. Tranio persuades a pedant to impersonate Vincentio (Lucentio's father). They convince Baptista to sign a marriage contract.

Petruchio arrives late to his wedding in a ludicrous outfit and refuses to stay for the banquet. He abuses his new wife, starving her and insisting she agree with every word he says, no matter how ridiculous. Vincentio arrives at Lucentio's house only to be arrested as a fraud. Lucentio and Bianca, now husband and wife, return. Baptista, realises now, the real Vincentio will, despite everything, honour the marriage contract and outside Petruchio and Kate kiss. At a celebration banquet, the apparently tamed Kate proves herself the most obedient wife of the women present.

Probably written around 1592.

31) The tempest

Too occupied with his occult studies, Prospero loses the duchy of Milan to his brother Antonio. Saved by the courtier Gonzalo, Prospero is cast adrift with his daughter, Miranda, and arrives on a lonely island, previously inhabited only by the witch Sycorax her monstrous son Caliban, and various imprisoned spirits, including Ariel. Having

defeated Sycorax Prospero enslaves Caliban and takes Ariel into his service. Summoning up a tempest, Prospero wrecks a ship on the island. While Antonio and Sebastian plot against Adonso (Sebastian's brother and the King of Naples) and Gonzalo, Ferdinand (Adonso's son) falls in love with Miranda. Caliban meets the butler Stephano and a jester Trinculo, vainglorious with stolen wine, and persuades them to attack Prospero. Meanwhile, Prospero tests Ferdinand's love, making him fetch and carry logs, then blesses the lovers with a magical masque. Through a series of illusions, Prospero soon has the conspirators in his power, but spares them. Breaking his magic staff, Prospero then frees Ariel and returns to Milan. Caliban is left alone on the island.

Probably written in 1611, first performed for King James I at Whitehall in the same year, long thought to be Shakespeare's last play for the London stage before his retirement.

32) Timon of Athens

Timon is a rich man, an Athenian noble who ruins himself through his generosity. Realizing that he has fallen victim to flatterers and parasites, he turns to his men friends for help, but they desert him. He invites all his acquaintances to a banquet, at which he serves them only warm water, then curses the city and retires to a bitter and solitary life in a cave. Searching for roots to eat, he uncovers a hoard of gold, but no longer has use for money and rails against those who are drawn to him by his new found wealth. When the Athenians seek his help against the army of the exiled Alcibiades he shows them his fig tree and tells them to seek solace by hanging themselves from it. He dies alone, leaving only a vitriolic epitaph on a tomb by the sea 'Seek not my name: a plague consume you wicked caitiffs left!'

Probably written in about 1607, possibly in collaboration with Thomas Middleton, but never finished.

33) Titus Andronicus

Titus Andronicus, a popular general and patriot, returns from a successful campaign against the Goths, bringing as captives their Queen, Tamora and her three sons, one of whom Titus kills. Titus has to settle a succession dispute between the emperor's sons, Saturninus and Bassianus. Titus nominates the elder, Saturninus. They fight over Titus's daughter, Lavinia, and Titus kills one of his own sons. Bassianus marries Lavinia, Saturninus dismisses Titus and marries Tamora who loves Aaron, a Moor. Aaron persuades Tamora's sons, Demetrius and Chiron, to kill Bassianus and rape Lavinia, and frames Titus's sons, Martius and Quintus. He tells Titus that his sons will be spared if he sends the Emperor his severed hand as ransom. Titus's hand is returned to him with his sons heads, the promise has been broken.

Titus's brother Marcus Andronicus discovers Lavinia, who has had her tongue and hands cut off but is still able to communicate the truth of what has been done to her. Increasingly unpredictable, Titus raises an army of Goths against Rome. Titus's only surviving son Lucius captures Aaron, Titus seizes Demetrius and Chiron and bakes them into a pie. Titus kills his raped daughter and, showing famous the heads of her sons in the pie she is eating, stabs her. Bassianus kills Titus, Lucius kills Saturninus and is elected emperor. Aaron, still glorying in his evil, is buried up to his chest in sand.

Probably Shakespeare's earliest tragedy, may have been written as early as 1590.

34) **Troilus and Cressida**

The Trojan Prince Troilus is lovesick for Cressida, whose father Calchas has deserted to the Greeks. Cressida refuses to tell Troilus she loves him too. He pledges his undying love to Cressida, but it is Pandarus who promises Cressida's love to Troilus. After spending a night of love with Troilus, and pledging to remain faithful forever, a heartbroken Cressida is taken into the Greek camp in exchange for a Trojan prisoner of war.

Arguments are beginning to take hold within the Greek and Trojan camps after seven years of fruitless combat. Troilus's brother Hector suggests returning Helen (whose abduction by Paris caused the war) to the Greeks, but, despite Cassandra's prophetic warnings, Troilus and Paris deem it a dishonourable suggestion.

At a banquet in the Greek camp, Troilus sees Cressida make a rendezvous with Diomedes. He refuses to read a letter Pandarus brings from her, and tries to revenge himself on her new lover in the following day's fighting. The battle ends with the sordid death of Hector, caught as he tries on some captured armour.

Probably written in 1602.

35) **Twelfth night**

Look-alike twins Sebastian and Viola are separated in a shipwreck. Viola, disguised as the boy Cesario, is made intermediary for Duke Orsino in his unrequited love affair with Olivia. Olivia falls in love with Cesario, but the mortified 'Youth' has fallen for the Duke. Challenged to a duel by another of Olivia's frustrated suitors, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, Cesario (the disguised Viola) is saved by the arrival of Antonio, a sea captain who mistakes Cesario for Sebastian whom he rescued. Olivia, coming across Sebastian and mistaking him for Cesario, drags him to her home and marries him. Thinking Cesario has betrayed his trust, Orsino calls Antonio and Olivia before him. Sebastian appears and clears up the confusion, and the Duke, at last appreciative of her love for him, marries Viola.

The subplot contrasts Malvolio, Olivia a mean-spirited and ambitious steward, with the self indulgent, uproarious Sir Toby Belch, who demands 'Dost thou think because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?' Malvolio is tricked into believing Olivia, his mistress, is in love with him, leading him into dreadful humiliation at the hands of Maria and Fabian, two servants of Olivia, Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Feste, a jester, all of whom bear grudges against Malvolio. Malvolio's bitter departure, humiliated but unrepentant, reveals a brutality beneath the humour.

Probably written in 1601, first recorded performance at Middle Temple in February 1602.

36) **Two noble kinsmen**

Theseus, King of Athens, defeats the tyrannical Creon of Thebes, capturing Creon a nephews, Palamon and Arcite. Seeing Emilia, daughter of Queen Hippolyta from their prison window, both knights fall in love and decide to fight for her when they are free. Arcite is freed and banished from Athens on pain of death, but stays in disguise to woo Emilia. Theseus's daughter falls in love with Palamon and helps him to escape. Mad with grief at Palamon's departure, she is cured by a low-born suitor who seduces her disguised as Palamon.

Meeting by chance in a wood, Palamon and Arcite renew their argument. Theseus

discovers them and orders a contest. Each combatant must force the other against a pillar erected for the purpose, the victor wins Emilia's hand, the loser will be executed. Arcite is victorious, but as Palamon awaits execution, his cousin is trampled by a horse and bequeaths Emilia to Palamon with his dying breath.

The prologue acknowledges Geoffrey Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* as the source of the play, the only major addition to the story is the gaoler's daughter.

First published in 1634, it did not appear in the First Folio edition, largely written by John Fletcher.

37) **Two gentlemen of Verona**

Proteus (pining for the love of Julia) and Valentine go to the court of Milan. Valentine falls in love with the Duke's daughter Silvia and plans to elope with her. Proteus also falls so much in love with her that he betrays his friend to the Duke. Valentine is banished; Proteus gains only Silvia's scorn. Julia arrives, disguised as a page called Sebastian. Overhearing Proteus tell Silvia the lie that Valentine and Julia are both dead, she offers her services as a go-between. Silvia flees in search of Valentine (now captain of an outlaw band), and is chased by the Duke, Thurio (the Duke's chosen husband for Silvia), Proteus and 'Sebastian'. Proteus rescues Silvia from the outlaws and demands her love, when she refuses he tries to rape her, but is stopped by Valentine, who is so moved by Proteus's pleas for forgiveness that he offers Silvia to him anyway. 'Sebastian' faints. Realizing that 'Sebastian' is Julia, Proteus falls in love with her again. Thurio arrives to claim Silvia, but declines a duel with Valentine. Valentine is pardoned and he and Silvia marry.

Probably written 1592 / 1593.

38) **A winter's tale**

èSuspecting his virtuous wife Hermione is having an affair with Polixenes, an old friend and the King of Bohemia, Leontes tries to poison him and, when he escapes, imprisons his wife. Hermione gives birth to Perdita. Ignoring a Delphian oracle that confirms Hermione's innocence, Leontes orders Antigonus to maroon the baby on a barren shore. Antigonus obeys, leaving her in a remote part of Bohemia, and is eaten by a bear. Leontes's son Mamillius dies, and Hermione faints and is assumed to be dead.

Brought up by a shepherd for 16 years, Perdita is noticed by Polixenes's son Florizel. They are soon enraptured. Polixenes is furious when he finds out, and Florizel, Perdita and her adoptive father all flee to Leontes's court. There Perdita is recognized as the lost princess, and Leontes persuades Polixenes to let their children marry. Antigonus's widow, Paulina, now takes Leontes who has sworn not to remarry, to see a statue that is an exact likeness of his dead wife. Overcome by grief, he repents of his injustices, and the 'statue' of Hermione comes to life she has been in hiding all the time her husband thought she was dead.

Written in 1610 or 1611 first performed at the Globe in 1611, part of Princess Elisabeth's wedding celebrations.