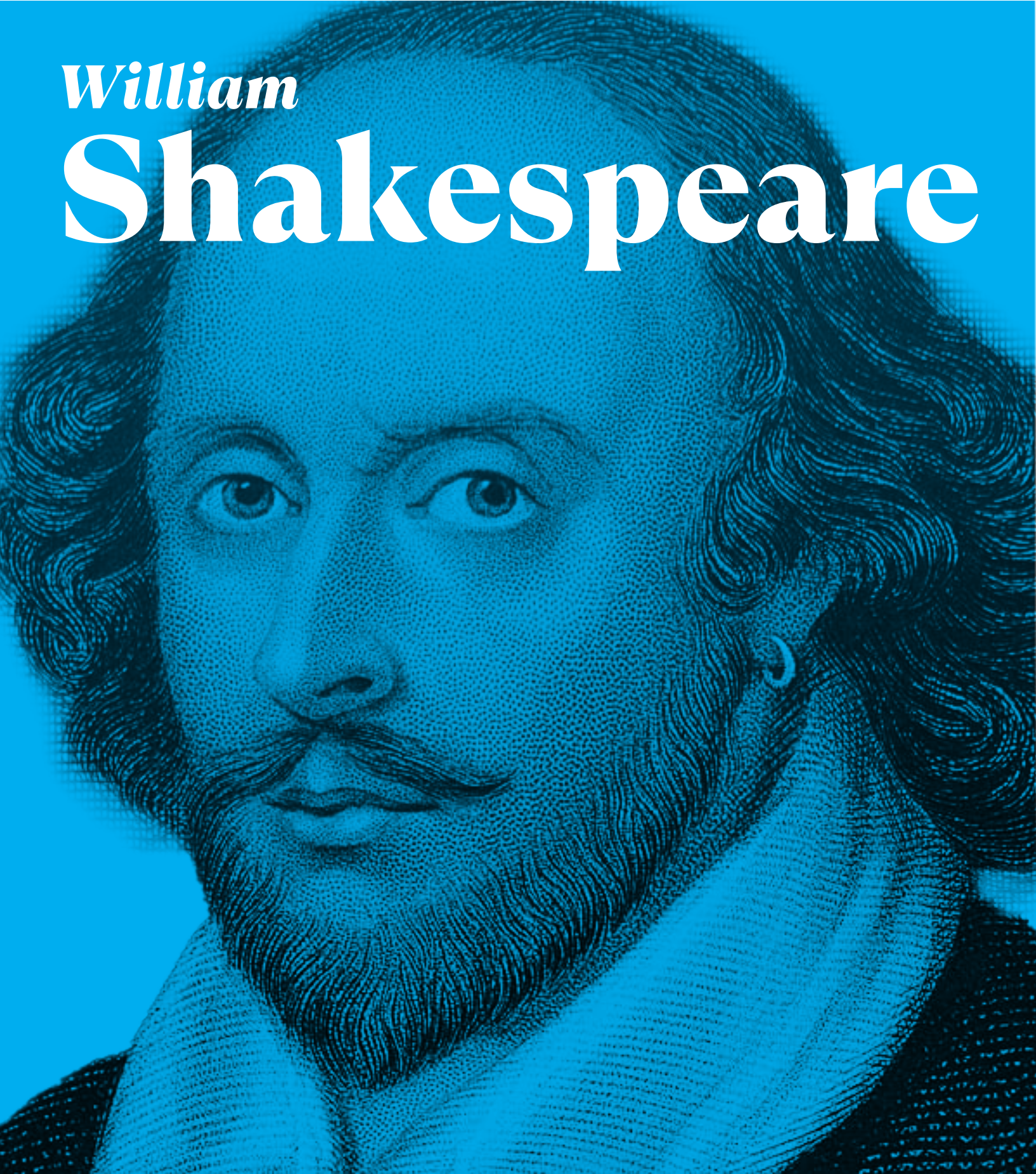


**BIOGRAPHY**  
**STUDY GUIDE**

*William*

**Shakespeare**



# William Shakespeare Study Guide

In this Biography.com study guide, we explore the life and legacy of William Shakespeare. Through his iconic plays and poems, you'll learn why his works continue to be studied, performed, and celebrated worldwide.

## Learning Objectives

Through this study guide, students will:

- Demonstrate an understanding of themes and characters in three of Shakespeare's most important plays.
  - Demonstrate an understanding of language and literary structure in Shakespeare's sonnets.
  - Examine Shakespeare's life and times to understand the historical context for his work.
  - Explore Shakespeare's lasting legacy on our language and popular culture.
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## 1

# Who Was William Shakespeare?



FROM TOP: Illustrated portrait of William Shakespeare at a desk; Shakespeare's birthplace in Stratford-upon-Avon

While many details surrounding the life of William Shakespeare remain unclear, scholars believe he was born around April 26, 1564, in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, a market town some 100 miles from London. His father was John Shakespeare, a glove-maker who also served as an elected official before suffering business losses that left his family in debt beginning when William Shakespeare was in his teens. Shakespeare's mother, Mary Arden, was the daughter of a wealthy nearby landowner.

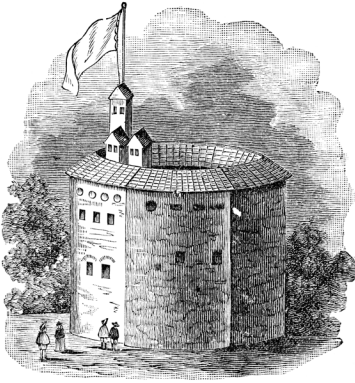
Shakespeare was the third of eight children, two of whom died in infancy and another who died before age 10. William's younger sister, Joan, was the only sibling to outlive the famous playwright, who left her money, clothing, and the deed to the family home in his later will. Scholars believe there is strong evidence that the Shakespeare family was Catholic, a fact they would have likely kept secret due to anti-Catholic sentiment following the Reformation of the English church earlier in the 16th century.

Shakespeare likely attended the nearby grammar school, and while some scholars have expressed doubt that Shakespeare's education was comprehensive enough to allow him to create his later work, it's now believed that the Stratford school was well-regarded and Shakespeare would have received a solid education, including Latin and the Classics.

He left school in his mid-teens and, unlike some of his contemporaries including Christopher Marlowe, didn't attend college. Shakespeare was expected to become an apprentice, but that plan was interrupted in 1592 when the 18-year-old married Anne Hathaway, a woman eight years his senior who was already pregnant with their first child. Their daughter, Susanna, was born the next year, then the couple had twins, Hamnet and Judith, in 1585. Hamnet died in 1596 at age 11, but by that time, Shakespeare had moved to London, returning to Stratford only intermittently over the next several decades. Shakespeare retired from his writing career around 1613 and returned permanently to his family in Stratford where he died in late April 1616 at age 52 of unknown causes.

## 2

# Shakespeare's Plays



*Etching of The Globe Theatre in London's Southbank*

Little is known about Shakespeare's life in the years immediately after his marriage, a period scholars consider "the lost years." But by 1592, Shakespeare had moved to London and established himself as an actor in The Lord Chamberlain's men, a theater group led by its star Richard Burbage. The troupe eventually made their home in the newly-built Globe Theatre on London's Southbank. Shakespeare helped with the Globe's construction, and his partial ownership stake brought him much-needed financial security.

However, it was through his work as the group's primary playwright that he found fame. Between the late 1580s and 1613, Shakespeare wrote at least 38 plays. Some scholars believe he might have made contributions to plays by other people or that some original Shakespearean works were subsequently lost. Despite their place in the literary canon, there has been much debate over whether Shakespeare was actually the author of his plays. Opponents claim Shakespeare didn't have the educational background and knowledge displayed in the works and have proposed several alternate candidates, but the consensus among scholars is that he was indeed the real author.

His works drew deeply on historic events and were frequently set in foreign lands few of his audience had ever visited. As with much of Shakespeare's life, the timeline of the writing of his plays remains unclear. He likely started on his first plays around 1589. Although there is continued debate surrounding which came first, his earliest works are the three *Henry VI* plays, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Shakespeare's plays are generally grouped into three categories: comedies, tragedies, and histories.

***The Two Gentlemen  
of Verona*** (written  
between 1589–1591\*)

***The Taming of the  
Shrew*** (1590–1591)

***The Comedy of Errors***  
(1594)

***Love's Labour's Lost***  
(1594–1595)

***A Midsummer Night's  
Dream*** (1595)

***The Merchant of Venice***  
(1596–1597)

***The Merry Wives of  
Windsor*** (1597–1598)

***Much Ado About  
Nothing*** (1598–1599)

***As You Like It***  
(1599–1600)

***Twelfth Night*** (1601)

***Troilus and Cressida***  
(1602)

***Measure for Measure***  
(1603–1604)

***All's Well That Ends  
Well*** (1606–1607)

***Pericles*** (1607)

***The Winter's Tale***  
(1609–1610)

***Cymbeline***  
(1610–1611)

***The Tempest***  
(1610–1611)

***The Two Noble  
Kinsmen*** (1613)

# Comedies

## CASE STUDY: A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

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Written around 1595, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is set in an enchanted forest in medieval Athens, Greece. Shakespeare found inspiration for the play in earlier works, including Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*.

The plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* centers around the wedding of two nobles, and it tells the tale of four young lovers: Hermia, Lysander, Helena, and Demetrius. As with several other Shakespearean plays, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* focuses on love in various forms. The relationship between Hippolyta and Theseus is stable and mature, providing a sense of order to their world. This is contrasted with the exuberant, childlike passions of the four young lovers, whose quarrels and jealousy leave them in a constant state of emotional chaos and disorder.

Befitting one of Shakespeare's other inspirations, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, transformation plays a key role in the play. There's physical transformation—Puck turns Bottom's head into a donkey—as well as emotional transformation, as the lovers fall in and out of love with each other over the course of the play.

Another running theme is the contrast between reality and illusion. Shakespeare was writing during an era fascinated with all things magical, and the play's world is filled with supernatural and imaginative elements. The mischievous fairies set the action of the play in motion and create the central conflicts, casting spells and manipulating human characters as they please. Dreams also play a key role in the play, as characters are influenced by subconscious thoughts.

\*Editor's Note: Sources vary on when Shakespeare wrote many of his plays.

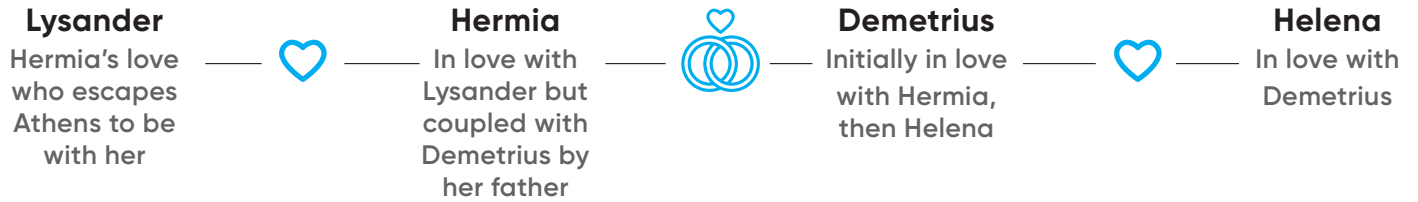
Data based on *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works (Second Edition)*

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## CASE STUDY: MAIN CHARACTERS IN A *MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*

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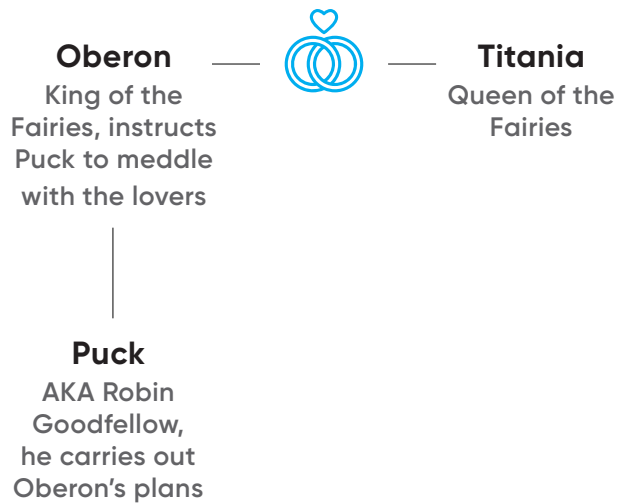
### The Lovers



### The Athenians



### The Fairies



**Titus Andronicus**  
(1592\*)

**Romeo and Juliet**  
(1595)

**Julius Caesar**  
(1599)

**Hamlet**  
(1600–1601)

**Othello**  
(1603–1604)

**King Lear**  
(1605–1606)

**Timon of Athens**  
(1606)

**Macbeth**  
(1606)

**Antony and Cleopatra**  
(1606)

**Coriolanus**  
(1608)

# Tragedies

## CASE STUDY: ROMEO AND JULIET

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Considered one of the greatest romantic works in history, *Romeo and Juliet* was written around 1595. Shakespeare based the play on several works published earlier in the 16th century, including a story by an Italian writer as well as a poem, *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet* by Arthur Brooke.

Nearly a dozen of Shakespeare's plays were set in Italy, and *Romeo and Juliet* takes place in Verona, home to two rival families: the Montagues and the Capulets. The action takes place in less than a week, as the two teenaged lead characters meet and fall in love.

While one of the play's primary themes is love, Shakespeare counters that lightness with darkness. Love is also the source of chaos, overpowering emotion, and even violence. Friar Lawrence warns Romeo of the destabilizing power of love. And as predicted, Romeo and Juliet's relationship has violent consequences, leading to the deaths of Tybalt, Mercutio, and the young lovers themselves.

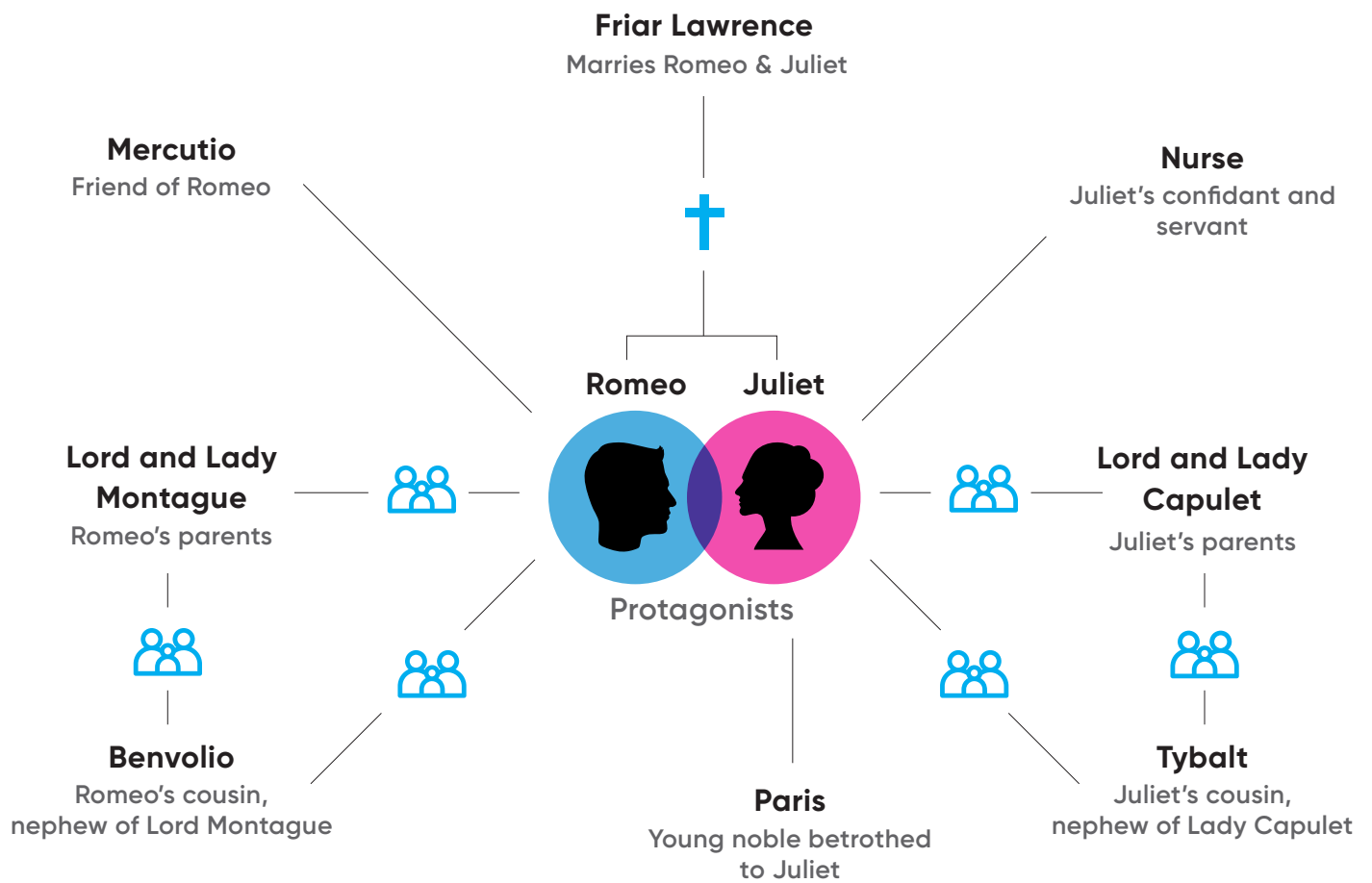
Shakespeare also explores the idea of individuals versus society, as Romeo and Juliet come into conflict with what society expects of them. This is further examined in how Shakespeare pits youth versus old. The relationship between Romeo and Juliet pits them against their parents, and they defy what their parents see as their duty, particularly when Juliet refuses to marry Paris. The play shows that these brash youth are willing to risk everything to chart their own path.

**\*Editor's Note:** Sources vary on when Shakespeare wrote many of his plays.

Data based on *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works (Second Edition)*

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## CASE STUDY: MAIN CHARACTERS IN A ROMEO AND JULIET





**Henry VI, Part 2**  
(1590–1591\*)

**Henry VI, Part 3**  
(1591)

**Henry VI, Part 1**  
(1592)

**Richard III**  
(1592–1593)

**Richard II**  
(1595)

**King John**  
(1596)

**Henry IV, Part 1**  
(1596–1597)

**Henry IV, Part 2**  
(1597–1598)

**Henry V**  
(1598–1599)

**Henry VIII**  
(1613)

# Histories

## CASE STUDY: RICHARD III

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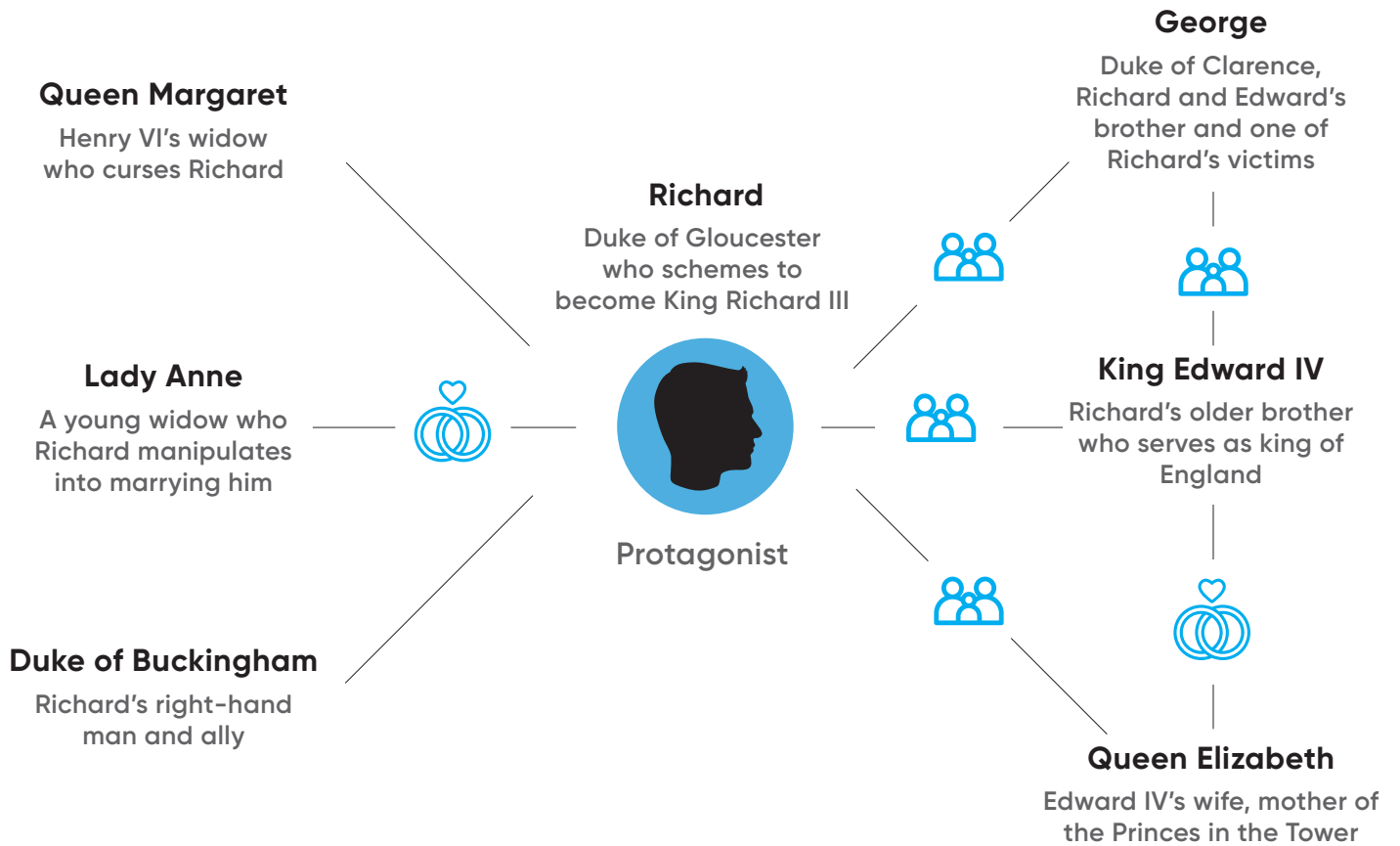
*Richard III*, like many of Shakespeare's other history plays, is set during the Wars of the Roses, a tumultuous 30-year period that saw the rival houses of Lancaster and York fight for the English throne. Written around 1592, a little more than a century after the Wars ended, the play reflects Tudor-era views of the conflict, which saw Richard, Duke of Gloucester, as a villainous usurper. The play was an incredibly effective bit of Elizabethan propaganda, and its fictionalized version of a mad king helped define public opinions of the real Richard III for centuries.

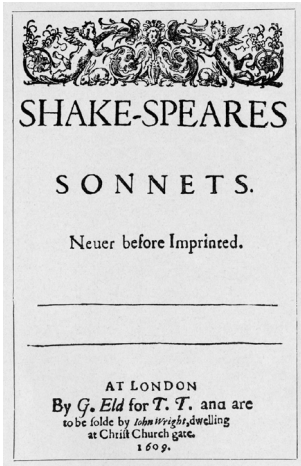
A major theme of the play is the corrupting power of ambition, as Richard schemes to seize power by any means necessary. He's portrayed as a calculating, hunchbacked lead character who connives, betrays, manipulates, and according to Shakespeare, even murders his young nephews to achieve his aims. Additional themes include the danger of unchecked power, as Richard becomes a tyrannical ruler whose despotism leads to his downfall.

Shakespeare also explores the concept of fate versus free will, a subject he revisited in other works. Throughout the play, the characters struggle to decide if their actions and the actions of others are conscious choices or predestined and predetermined events they are powerless against.

Another major theme is the power of words and language. The brilliant Richard gains as much power through his cunning words that manipulate others as he does by his violent acts.

## CASE STUDY: MAIN CHARACTERS IN *RICHARD III*





Title page of *Sonnets*,  
1609 edition

### 3

# Shakespeare's Sonnets

Shakespeare also wrote poetry, including at least 154 sonnets. The sonnets were first published in 1609 likely without his permission. Each sonnet is 14 lines long, divided into three *stanzas* of four lines each (known as a *quatrain*) followed by a two-line couplet. Like his plays, the sonnets were written in iambic pentameter rhyming scheme with 10 syllables in each line.

Scholars believe 126 of the sonnets are addressed to a handsome, young aristocratic man, known as the “Fair Youth.” In these poems, Shakespeare details his close relationship with the Fair Youth, praising his beauty and urging him to marry and procreate to carry on his line. While some scholars believe these sonnets depict a romantic intimacy between the two men, others believe that the relationship was platonic.

Approximately two dozen of the sonnets were addressed to the “Dark Lady,” a woman who infatuates Shakespeare. Based on his physical descriptions, some scholars believe the Dark Lady might have been a lady-in-waiting to Queen Elizabeth I, a female poet, or even a London prostitute. As in the case of the Fair Youth, the Dark Lady’s identity hasn’t been confirmed. In any case, these sonnets alternate between desire, obsession, jealousy, and anguish.

In addition to the sonnets, Shakespeare wrote several longer narrative poems. The two most important of which were *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594).

**Discussion Questions:**

How does Shakespeare use figurative language in the sonnet? What are some examples?

Why do you think Shakespeare chose to use “summer” as his comparison for the Fair Youth?

Explain the importance of mortality in the sonnet. What is Shakespeare immortalizing?

How do you interpret the final two lines of the poem?

**Activity:**

Ready to be like the Bard? It's time to write your own sonnet! Remember the rules of Elizabethan-era sonnet style: 14 lines, iambic pentameter, three quatrains, and then a couplet at the end. Who are you dedicating your sonnet to?

# Sonnets

**CASE STUDY: SONNET 18**

Arguably the most famous of Shakespeare's sonnets, Sonnet 18 is addressed to the Fair Youth, and its themes include beauty and love. Several candidates have been proposed as the young man Shakespeare is writing about, including Henry Wriothesley and William Herbert, two English earls who were also Shakespeare's patrons. The sonnet was published six years before Shakespeare's death, though scholars are uncertain of when it was written.

*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
 Thou art more lovely and more temperate.  
 Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
 And summer's lease hath all too short a date.  
 Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
 And often is his gold complexion dimmed;  
 And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
 By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed.  
 But thy eternal summer shall not fade  
 Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,  
 Nor shall Death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,  
 When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.  
 So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

# 4

## The Bard's Living Legacy

Shakespeare's works are also full of some of the best examples of Elizabethan humor: insults. Here are five of his best put-downs:

"[Thy] tongue outvenoms all the worms of the Nile."

—*Cymbeline*

**Translation:** They have a poisonous tongue and spread lies.

"His wit's as thick as Tewkesbury mustard."

—*Henry IV, Part 2*

**Translation:** He's stupid.

"Sell when you can, you are not for all markets."

—*As You Like It*

**Translation:** Take whatever offers you get because you're unattractive and not everybody's "cup of tea."

"You have a February face, so full of frost, of storm, and cloudiness."

—*Much Ado About Nothing*

**Translation:** You have a sour, cold, and deadpan expression.

"I am pigeon-livered and lack gall"

—*Hamlet*

**Translation:** I'm a coward.

Shakespeare's influence on our language is deep and everlasting. But did you know that he even invented words we still use today? Scholars estimate he used more than 20,000 different words in his work. Among them are some 1,700 words that Shakespeare either invented or published for the first time in his works.

*Check out a few of his inventions:*

**Alligator** (*Romeo and Juliet*)

**Wild goose chase** (*Romeo and Juliet*)

**Cold-blooded** (*King John*)

**Eyeball** (*Henry VI, Part 1*)

**Fashionable** (*Troilus and Cressida*)

**Gossip** (*The Comedy of Errors*)

**Obscene** (*Love's Labour's Lost*)

**Rant** (*Hamlet*)

**Swagger** (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*)

**Worthless** (*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*)

He didn't just stick to innovative words and phrases, either. Shakespeare's plays also introduced or popularized names that have become widespread in the centuries that followed, including Jessica, Miranda, Olivia, and Viola.

# Shakespeare Onscreen



Shakespeare's plays have been continuously performed around the world for more than 425 years, and several of them have been made into movies. Some are straightforward versions of the original plays, while others have used Shakespeare's stories as a launching pad for original works. These include musicals like *West Side Story* (based on *Romeo and Juliet*) and *Kiss Me Kate* (*The Taming of the Shrew*).

The creators of the Disney musical *The Lion King* based much of its plot and several characters on *Hamlet*. Simba is a prince whose father is murdered just like Hamlet, and he also receives ghostly visitations from his father. Simba must avenge his father's death and vanquish his murderous uncle Scar (a stand-in for Claudius). The *Lion King* also makes nods to other Shaskpearian works, including a character named Timon (the lead character's name in *Timon of Athens*) and Pumbaa, the gluttonous warthog many scholars believe resembles the character of Falstaff, who appears in three of Shakespeare's history plays.

*The Taming of the Shrew* also served as inspiration for *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), reusing several of the original character's names to tell the story of Katherine "Kat," an unlikable "shrew" who is tricked into a fake relationship with Patrick so that her father will allow her younger sister, Bianca, to date.

Another adaptation involving high school is *She's the Man* (2006), which stars Amanda Bynes as Viola, a teen who switches places with her twin brother, Sebastian, as in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Both are set in Illyria, an island in the play and a boarding school in the film. In both versions, Olivia falls in love with "Sebastian," not realizing it's really Viola in disguise.

FROM TOP: *West Side Story*, *Kiss Me Kate*, *The Lion King*, *10 Things I Hate About You*, *She's The Man*

# How to Cite Shakespeare in MLA Style

When listing Shakespeare's plays in your works cited, include the author's last name then first name separated by a comma. Next comes the italicized play title followed by the book or website name. For book citations, include the version or edition information, editor(s), publisher, publication year, and page range. Web sources should be followed by the URL and access date. Examples:

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare: The Cambridge Edition*, edited by William Aldis Wright, Doubleday & Company Inc., 1936, pp. 731–779.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. *Folger Shakespeare Library*, <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/hamlet/read/>. Accessed 1 Aug. 2024.

Including Shakespeare's poetry in your works cited follows similar rules. Remember the name of the sonnet or poem should appear in quotation marks. Examples:

Shakespeare, William. "Sonnet 116." *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare: The Cambridge Edition*, edited by William Aldis Wright, Doubleday & Company Inc., 1936, p. 1418.

Shakespeare, William. "Sonnet 116: Let me not to the marriage of true minds." *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45106/sonnet-116-let-me-not-to-the-marriage-of-true-minds>. Accessed 1 Aug. 2024.

To cite Shakespeare using an in-text parenthetical citation, include the italicized play name then the act, scene, and line number(s). For sonnets, include the author's last name and the line number(s). The citation should appear at the end of the sentence. Examples:

(*Hamlet* 3.1.55-57)

(Shakespeare 1-2)

As each edition of Shakespeare's work has different line numbers, make sure to check the accuracy based on the edition you are using.

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# Additional Resources

[Biography.com's Complete Biography of William Shakespeare](#)

[Why Is William Shakespeare's Life Considered a Mystery?](#)

[Was Shakespeare the Real Author of His Plays?](#)

[Shakespeare Wrote Three of His Famous Tragedies During Turbulent Times](#)

[20 Famous Shakespeare Quotes That Show the Bard's Wit and Wisdom](#)

[How Did Shakespeare Die? What the Few Intriguing Clues Tell Us](#)

[Folger Shakespeare Library](#)

[Shakespeare Birthplace Trust](#)

[Poetry Foundation: William Shakespeare](#)

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