



# Welcome To Shakespeare

For more than 350 years, William Shakespeare has been the world's most popular playwright. On stage, in movies, and on television, his plays are watched by eager audiences all over the world. People read his plays again and again for the sheer pleasure.

*Unfortunately, many of us are intimidated by Shakespeare.*



That is where *Shakespeare for Beginners* comes in. Even if you've had trouble with Shakespeare in the past, *Shakespeare for Beginners* will make him accessible—and fun. This book will help you enjoy and appreciate Shakespeare quickly, without feeling like you're doing 'home-work' to prepare for him.



How will we do that?

Simple, really: For the most part, we will let the stories tell themselves. Shakespeare was capable —is capable— of stopping people in their tracks and persuading them to listen to a story. The writing Shakespeare is best known for is work for the theater, and theater is, first and foremost, *direct*.

It has to grab the audience and make it pay attention . . . RIGHT NOW.

Newcomers to Shakespeare are often surprised to find that his plays are filled with action, his characters are believable, and the situations they find themselves in are exactly like our own—greed, power, ambition, love, jealousy, old age, racism.



People haven't changed much in the last four centuries. It is both comforting and terrifying to see aspects of your own personality magnified by Shakespeare's genius in the 'overthinking' Prince of Denmark, the jealous Moor of Venice, the noble Cordelia, or the bitchy Kate. And the language, once you relax in its presence, is downright thrilling.

## FIVE THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT SHAKESPEARE'S THEATRICAL WORLD

**1:** Prose and poetry were both used by dramatists in Shakespeare's day. **Rhyming couplets** (two lines that rhyme) often alerted the audience to the end of a scene, or to a new situation or locale in a scene to come. (Rhyme could also occur within the scenes, of course.)

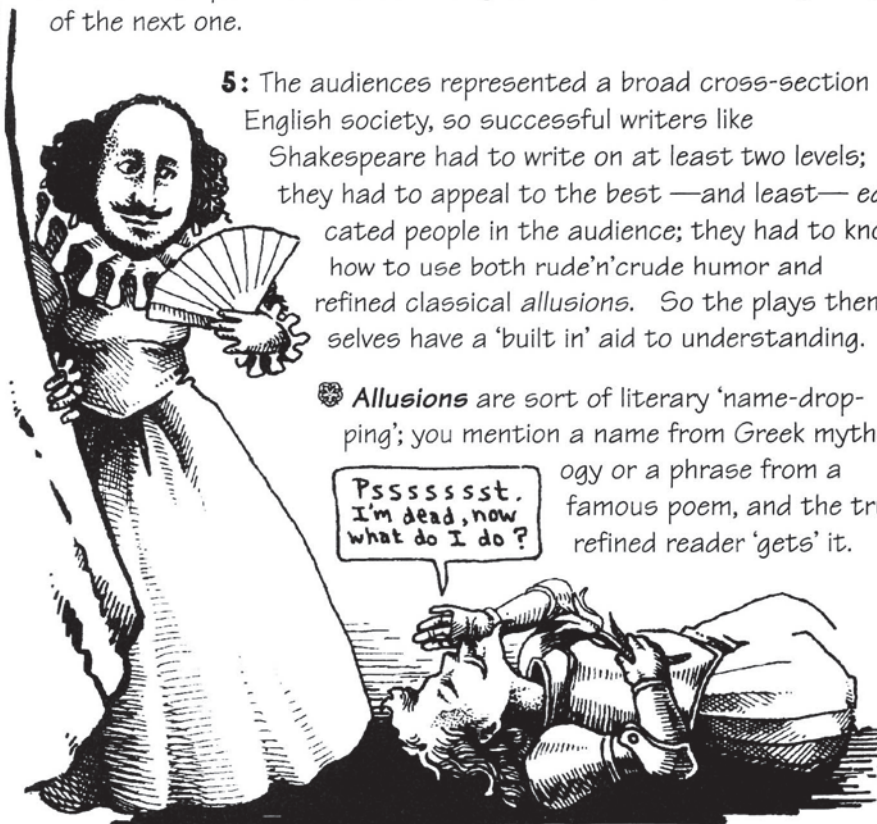
**2:** The women's parts were played by men. **Ingenues** (young girls) were usually played by boys.

**3:** There were no **'blackouts'**—no time when the **'lights'** (actually, candles) went out. So any time a character died in front of the audience, the body had to be carried off the stage.

**4:** The departure of all characters from the stage signaled the end of a scene; and, according to the convention of the time, a character could not take part in both the ending of one scene and the beginning of the next one.

**5:** The audiences represented a broad cross-section of English society, so successful writers like Shakespeare had to write on at least two levels; they had to appeal to the best—and least—educated people in the audience; they had to know how to use both rude'n'crude humor and refined classical *allusions*. So the plays themselves have a 'built in' aid to understanding.

☛ **Allusions** are sort of literary 'name-dropping'; you mention a name from Greek mythology or a phrase from a famous poem, and the truly refined reader 'gets' it.



Before we go further, let's have a look at the man himself.





## What do people really know about this guy?

**Not much.** He was baptized on April 26, 1564, in Stratford-on-Avon, England. His father John was a glover who was named to several important town posts, and may have had financial difficulties later in life. William wasted no time getting started in life. At the age of eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway. The couple had three children: Susanna (born in 1583), and the twins Hamnet and Judith (1585). (Hamnet died in 1596.) Nobody is certain exactly what Shakespeare did between 1583 and 1592. Somewhere along the line, he became an actor and began writing plays. In 1592, a jealous playwright named Robert Greene attacked Shakespeare in print, and made fun of the idea of an actor writing plays. Shakespeare apparently wasn't too impressed by Mr. Green's criticism; he continued to write and perform, and he became an important figure in the London literary and theatrical scene. He published two narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594). A writer named Francis Meres took notice of Shakespeare in 1598, listing twelve of his plays and complimenting his privately circulated poetry. The well-connected acting company with which Shakespeare was associated, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, built a theater in 1598 called the Globe; he owned an interest in the playhouse.

In 1603, when James I became King, the Lord Chamberlain's Men became the King's Men. Over the years, some of Shakespeare's plays were published in unauthorized editions (but many of his plays were never published during his lifetime); a collection of his sonnets appeared in 1609. After the Globe burned down in 1613, Shakespeare seems to have stopped writing and performing. He spent the last years of his life at Stratford, in a home he'd bought in 1597 called New Place. He died in 1616 and was buried in Stratford. Shakespeare's life was so unspectacular that some people have found it hard to believe that such an 'ordinary' man with so little formal schooling could create the greatest body of work in the English language. (As if genius could be taught in school!) Most scholars now accept the fact that Shakespeare did indeed write his own plays.

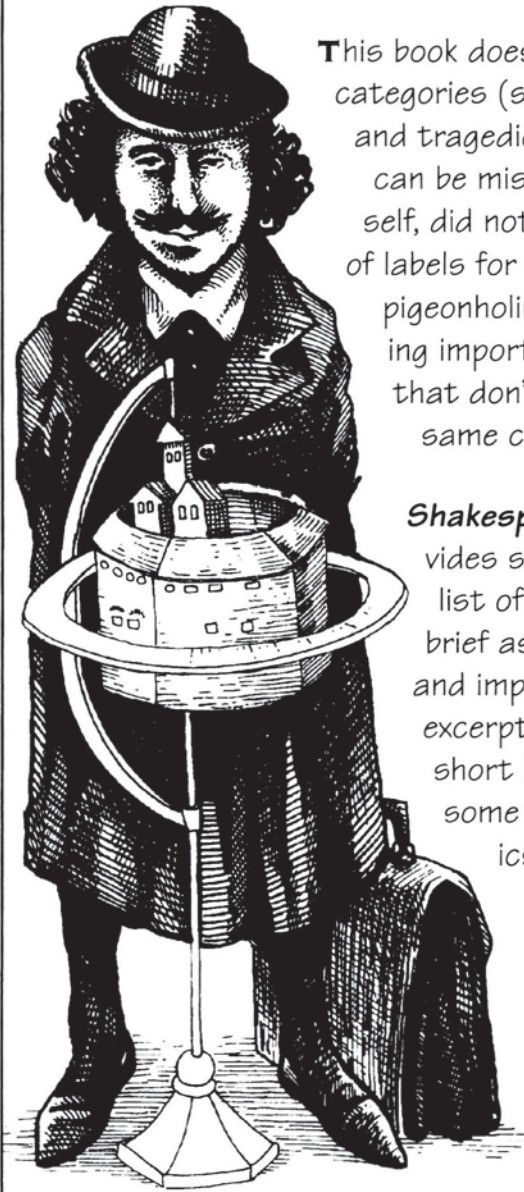
Those are pretty slim pickings for the biography of a genius. Fortunately, it is Shakespeare's writing, not his personal life, that has captivated audiences for nearly four centuries. That writing is the Shakespeare we'll be looking at in the following pages.

*In most cases textual excerpts and act and scene divisions reflect Nicolaus Delius's seven volume Works of Shakespeare (1854-1860); spelling and punctuation have occasionally been altered to reflect modern usage.*



## “So how does the book work?”

*Shakespeare for Beginners* examines the plays first, in roughly the order that we think they were written—we can't be certain. (This book does not include the collaborations, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and *Henry VIII*.)



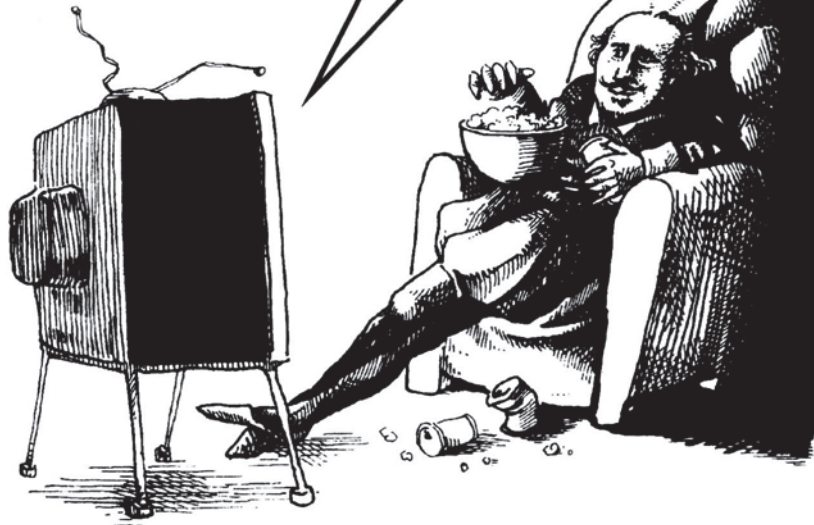
This book does not divide the plays into categories (such as comedies, histories, and tragedies), since that approach can be misleading. Shakespeare, himself, did not use any consistent series of labels for the plays he wrote, and pigeonholing them can mean overlooking important parallels between plays that don't happen to fall into the same category.

*Shakespeare for Beginners* provides summaries of each work, a list of key phrases and themes, brief assessments of main ideas and important concepts in the text, excerpts of key passages, and short but insightful quotes from some of the most influential critics..

Obviously, this book is not meant to replace the works themselves.



AND NOW, A BRIEF WORD FROM OUR SPONSOR



A book summarizing the work of a writer usually suggests that you go out and read the author's books. *Shakespeare for Beginners*, however, will not plead with you to read Shakespeare's plays—unless you feel like it. Plays are meant to be experienced in person, not read. Dogmatic English instructors force their students to read Shakespeare's plays—then they wonder why the students consider Shakespeare boring.

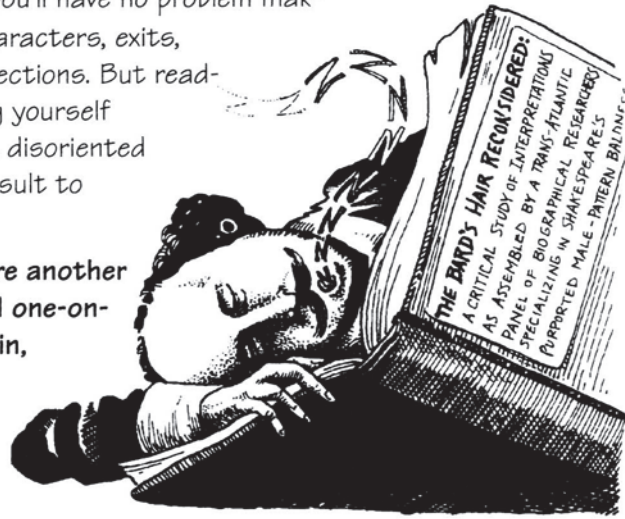
Any play can be boring if you're forced read it to yourself. A theatrical script is like a roadmap showing the way toward a final work of art—it is not the work of art itself. Plays are designed to be performed. If Shakespeare had intended his plays to be read privately rather than acted, he would have seen to it that they were published. As far as we can tell, Shakespeare had no hand in the printing or editing of the dramas he wrote.

If you really want to enjoy Shakespeare's dramatic work,  
get out to a theater and see a production of the play . . .  
or rent a good video.

(Or get a bunch of friends together and  
read the script out loud.)

⊕nce you see the play, you'll have no problem making sense of all of the characters, exits, entrances, and stage directions. But reading a play "cold," dragging yourself through page after page, disoriented and bored—that is an insult to Shakespeare's genius.

The poems, of course, are another matter. They do demand one-on-one attention. Then again, they're probably not what most people think of when they think of Shakespeare!



## A Few Words About The Bard's Use of Language

Don't worry if at first you have trouble understanding Shakespeare's language. Everybody does. Then, in no time at all, like listening to a dialect or 'accent' from another part of the country, the fog clears and you wonder why you had any trouble—it's obvious once you get the hang of it. A few helpful 'tricks':

- ☺ **Again: See the play:** A good actor can communicate the meaning of a phrase even when you don't understand the dictionary meaning of each individual word.
- ☺ **Assume (or pretend) that you understand what's being said—** and 90% of the time you will.
- ☺ **Stick with it:** In no time, you'll run into enough captivating stuff to make you want to "march unto the breach" again and again. Later on, if you like, you can use footnotes and glossaries to your heart's content. A fat encyclopedia could be written about the Bard's verbal style and influence, but this book isn't it.



## AND ABOUT BLANK VERSE...

As Shakespeare's career progresses, his proficiency in the ten-syllable blank — that is, unrhyming — verse form becomes breathtaking. (You probably remember blank verse from school: **da-DAH da DAH da DAH da DAH da DAH.**) The Bard's early efforts at verse are often stiff, forced, and monotonous; the middle period shows confident power and expansion; and the final plays demonstrate an amazing ease and fluidity. Look at these examples, which show the change, over two decades, from block-like, self-contained ten-syllable sentences to shifting, smooth-flowing currents of meaning.

📖 **E**arly 1590s: (*Note: "beldam" means "old hag"*)

Lay hands upon these traitors and their trash!  
Beldam, I think we watch'd you at an inch.  
(*Henry VI, Part Two, act I, scene iv*)

📖 **L**ate 1590s:

You have conspir'd against our royal  
person,  
Join'd with an enemy proclaim'd, and  
from his coffers  
Receiv'd the golden earnest of our  
death.  
(*Henry V, act II, scene ii*)

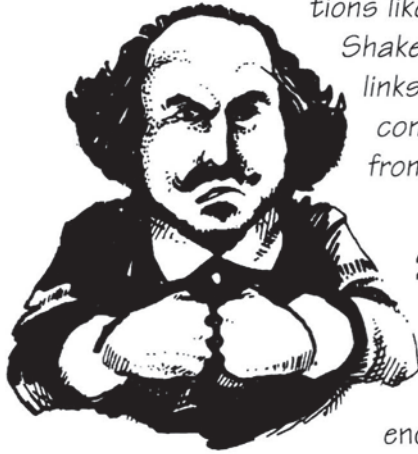
📖 **A**round 1610:

But you, my brace of lords, were  
I so minded,  
I here could pluck his  
Highness' frown upon you  
And justify you traitors. At this time  
I will tell no tales.  
(*The Tempest, act V, scene i*)



## THREE COOL THINGS ABOUT SHAKESPEARE'S ENGLISH

**1:** When Shakespeare began his career, the English language was flexible and still developing. Shakespeare made the most of the situation, displaying dazzling innovations like a great jazz improviser:



Shakespeare turns nouns into verbs, links adjectives together to form new combinations, and borrows words from other languages.

**2:** Shakespeare's vocabulary is big: 21,000 words plus. Not only can't a modern audience 'understand' every word, Shakespeare's audience couldn't understand every word!

Shakespeare often chose his words to take advantage of their newness, to make us look at a situation in a new way, and to get the meaning from the context. In other words, he wants you to loosen up and follow him, not sit on each line with a dictionary.

**3:** Shakespeare often uses what poets call *personification*—giving human attributes to non-humans. In Shakespeare, a tree may be angry, the moon may blush, the morning may have eyes...in most cases, that is not meant to be taken literally—it is as if the moon blushed, or as if the morning had eyes.

