

# *Shakespeare Plays*

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# William Shakespeare

- A ready reference for students, teachers, and Shakespeare lovers
- The Shakespeare timeline has been provided for your reference; Shakespeare wrote 37 plays over a span of 20 years
- Shakespeare's playwriting can be divided into four periods:
- During his First period Shakespeare wrote a number of romantic comedies, as well as some history plays about English kings of the 15th century
  - *Titus Andronicus* was a type of revenge drama of its day that was in style of the Senecan tragedy
- During his Second period his plays are full of ease, power, and maturity, such as:
  - *Romeo and Juliet, A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Merchant of Venice, Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2, and The Merry Wives of Windsor*
- Shakespeare's third period probes the problem of evil in the world, and he wrote some of his great tragedy plays, such as:
  - *Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth, and Antony and Cleopatra, etc.*
- In his fourth period, he used a new form—the romance or tragicomedy: stories of wandering and separation ending in tearful & joyous reunion
  - *The Tempest* is the most notable of these romances



A painting depicting a scene from Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice'. It shows Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, in a dark robe and red hat, handing a document to Portia, a young woman in a yellow and blue dress. They are surrounded by other characters, including a man in a brown robe and hat, and a dog is visible in the foreground. The scene is set in a dimly lit room with a dark background.

# Love's Labour's Lost



# Love's Labour's Lost (1588-97)

- *Love's Labour's Lost* synopsis; **First Written**: 1588-97; Genre: Comedy
- The play centers on four young men who are dedicated to study and are not interested in women
- When they meet four young women, however, they eventually abandon their idea to live as scholars without romance
- Ferdinand, the king of Navarre, and three of his noblemen — Berowne (Biron), Longaville, and Dumaine (Dumain) — debate their intellectual plans
- Sworn to stay celibate, they, however, dither when the princess of France, attended by three ladies — Rosaline, Maria, and Katharine — arrives
- They soon fall for the ladies and try to conceal their feelings from one another, but are quickly found out
- The women are witty and enjoy making fun of them
- The play ends when Marcade arrives with sad news: the French king is dead and the princess must return home immediately for a period of one year
- It also gives the gentlemen enough time to ponder and come to maturity before resuming courtships of the women again



# Henry VI Part I





# Henry VI Part 1 (1589-92)

- *Henry VI part 1* synopsis; **First Written**: 1589-92. Genre: History Play
- The plot of *Henry VI, Part 1* begins at the funeral of Henry V, as political factions are forming around his young son, King Henry VI
- The boy is protected by rivaling ministers, and as the English struggle among themselves, they lose land in their war with France: the Hundred Year's War
- The chief rivalry is between Henry VI's uncle Humphrey, duke of Gloucester and Lord Protector, and his great-uncle Henry Beaufort, bishop of Winchester
- In addition, the peace dwindles in France, as Joan of Arc persuades the newly crowned French king, Charles VII, to reclaim French lands held by the English
- It soon devolves into war as the English dukes of York and Somerset feud over who is responsible for sending reinforcements to save the noble Lord Talbot
- As *Part 1* ends, the earl of Suffolk has persuaded Henry VI to marry Margaret of Anjou
- Suffolk plans to use the alliance to take power for himself: "Margaret shall now be Queen and rule the King; / But I will rule both her, the King, and realm."
- His plan's first success comes as *Part 2* begins, when Henry makes him the duke of Suffolk



# Titus Andronicus





# Titus Andronicus (1589-92)

- *Titus Andronicus* synopsis; **First Written**: 1589-92. Genre: Tragedy
- Shakespeare based the play on a variety of sources, including Euripides' *Hecuba*, Seneca's *Thyestes and Troades*, and parts of Ovid and Plutarch
- First, Titus Andronicus returns to Rome after having defeated the Goths, bringing with him Queen Tamora, whose eldest son he sacrifices to the gods
- The future emperor Saturninus is to marry Titus's daughter Lavinia; however, when his brother Bassianus elopes with her instead, Saturninus marries Tamora
- Saturninus and Tamora then plot revenge against Titus; Lavinia is raped by Tamora's cruel sons Demetrius and Chiron, who chop off her hands and tongue
- Titus vows to get revenge on Tamora's brutal family; meanwhile, Tamora takes as her lover a man named Aaron the Moor, who is later killed too
- To get his revenge, Titus, feigning madness, invites Demetrius and Chiron to his house and murders them, with Lavinia holding a basin to catch their blood
- Titus then prepares a feast in which he serves Tamora her own sons baked in a dish
- Titus kills Lavinia to end her shame, stabs Tamora, and is killed by Saturninus, at which Titus's son Lucius responds by killing Saturninus
- In the end, the blood-filled stage is looked over by Lucius and Titus's brother, Marcus, who are the sole survivors of Titus's family



# Comedy of Errors





## Comedy of Errors (1589-94)

- *Comedy of Errors* synopsis; **First Written:** 1589-94. Genre: Comedy
- The play *The Comedy of Errors* is about comic confusions between the twin brothers who, unknown to each other, appear in the same town
- Egeon, a merchant of Syracuse, captive in Ephesus due to hostilities between the two cities, defaults on the ransom and is condemned to death
- He recounts that long ago he had been shipwrecked with their infant sons, identical twins, and a pair of infant servants, also, identical twins
- The parents, each with a son and a servant, were rescued but then permanently separated
- Antipholus of Syracuse, the son raised by Egeon, has been seeking his mother and brother, while Egeon in turn has been seeking his missing son
- Egeon's story wins a day's respite to raise the ransom money; meanwhile, Antipholus of Syracuse (with his servant, Dromio) has arrived in Ephesus
- He does not know that his brother Antipholus of Ephesus (with his own servant, also named Dromio) is already there
- A series of misidentifications ensue; Antipholus of Syracuse is entertained by his brother's wife and woos her sister
- He receives a gold chain meant for his brother and is chased by a goldsmith for nonpayment
- Antipholus of Syracuse and his servant hide in a priory only to see Egeon facing execution; they recognize the abbess as Antipholus's mother, Emilia
- The play ends happily with Egeon's ransom paid, true identities revealed, and the family reunited





## Henry VI Part 2



# Henry VI part 2 (1590-92)

- *Henry VI part 2* synopsis; **First Written:** 1590-92. Genre: History
- Shakespeare wrote two sequences of the chronicle, dramatizing the struggle between two families to rule England in the 14<sup>th</sup> & 15<sup>th</sup> centuries
  - The first sequence consists of the plays *Henry VI, Part 1*, *Henry VI, Part 2*, *Henry VI, Part 3*, and *Richard III*
- The four plays of this first sequence tell the story of the War of Roses:
  - A series of civil wars fought from 1455 to 1485 between the houses of Lancaster and York for control of the English throne
- In *Part 2* the factional fighting at court is increased rather than lessened by the arrival of Margaret of Anjou:
  - The new queen with her lover, the duke of Suffolk, plots against Humphrey, duke of Gloucester, and his duchess, Eleanor
- Amid the power struggle, the effete Henry VI is aced by Richard Plantagenet, duke of York, who emerges as the chief contender for the throne
  - The commons grow increasingly restive, especially when Duke Humphrey appears to have been murdered by his political enemies
- Anarchy ensues when a Kentishman named Jack Cade, backed by Richard Plantagenet, lays siege to the city of London
  - Open civil war between the Yorkists and the Lancastrians is now imminent



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# Henry VI

## Part 3

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# Henry VI part 3 (1590-93)

- *Henry VI part 3* synopsis; **First Performed**: 1590-93. Genre: History
- The violence escalates in *Part 3*: The play begins as the Yorkists seize power and get the inept Henry VI to disinherit his son in favor of the Yorkist claim
  - Under this arrangement, Henry is supposed to reign until he dies; however, the Yorkists violate that treaty and take the throne by force
- Queen Margaret restores her disinherited son, Edward, prince of Wales, by allying with Lord Clifford, thus defeating and stabbing York to death
  - As Henry VI drifts wistfully through the action, York's sons consolidate their power
- The Lancastrians briefly regain the upper hand after York's eldest son, Edward IV, ignores a proposed marriage to the French princess
  - The marriage had been arranged by the earl of Warwick and King Lewis XI of France
- When Edward IV instead marries Elizabeth, Lady Grey, he loses the support of Warwick and Lewis
  - Margaret's triumph is short-lived, however, and the Lancastrians are defeated at the Battle of Tewkesbury
- Before the play ends, York's son Richard, duke of Gloucester, stabs Henry VI to death, thus enabling him to be king in the final play, *Richard III*



# The Taming of the Shrew





# The Taming of the Shrew (1590-94)

- *The Taming of the Shrew* synopsis; **First Written:** 1590-94. Genre: Comedy
- *The Taming of the Shrew* is a comedy that follows the courtships and marriages of two sisters
- The play opens in Padua, where several men are seeking to marry Bianca, a daughter of the wealthy Baptista
- Baptista, however, refuses to allow Bianca to marry until her older sister, Katharina, is married
- Katharina has a terrible temper and is cruel to all her suitors
- Petruchio arrives in town in search of a rich woman to be his wife; a friend suggests Katharina to him
- Even though Katharina does not like Petruchio and is unkind to him, Petruchio persists and refuses to give up
- Clearly, Petruchio and Katharina are equally matched in terms of wit and stubbornness, and she finds herself attracted to him
- They are married, and Petruchio attempts to show her the error of her ways by being cruel to her and towards the rest of his household
- Katharina eventually realizes the only way for her to live a peaceful life is to stop being so hurtful and becomes an obedient wife



...and the world a stranger for thy sake.



# The Two Gentlemen of Verona



# The Two Gentlemen of Verona (1590-94)

- *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* synopsis; **First Written**: 1594-95. Genre: Comedy
- *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is a pastoral story about two young friends who travel to Milan, where they are educated in courtly behavior
- The two gentlemen of the title are Valentine and Proteus, close friends who become rivals for Silvia, daughter of the duke of Milan
- For Silvia, Proteus betrays both Julia, his beloved, and Valentine, whom the duke banishes after learning of his plans to elope with Silvia
- Julia disguises herself as a boy and becomes Proteus's page, accompanying him as he relentlessly pursues Silvia, who flees to the forest
- There Silvia is captured by Valentine, who has become a bandit, and then rescued by Proteus
- In the end, lovers and friends are reconciled, with Valentine marrying Silvia and Proteus marrying Julia





**Richard III**



# Richard III (1592-94)

- *Richard III* synopsis; **First Written**: 1592-94. Genre: History
- Having killed King Henry VI and Henry's son, the prince of Wales, in *Henry VI, Part 3*, Richard sets out to kill all who stand between him and the throne
- He woos and marries Lady Anne, whose husband (Edward, prince of Wales) and father-in-law he has murdered; though, he soon arranges to kill her as well
- Showing contempt for King Edward's wife and then widow, Queen Elizabeth, he executes her sons, the Marquess of Dorset and Lord Grey
- Richard orders the execution of Lord Hastings when that courtier proves loyal to King Edward's children
- Henry persuades Cardinal Bouchier to place the young Duke of York and his brother under their uncle Richard's "protection" in the Tower of London
- Buckingham kills Hastings, calls in doubt the parentage of Edward and the young princes, and stages Richard's seemingly reluctant acceptance of the crown
- The nefarious partnership between Richard and Buckingham ends when Buckingham refuses to kill the young princes and then flees to escape the same fate
- An army led by Henry Tudor, earl of Richmond, challenges Richard's claim to the throne; he is haunted by the ghosts of all whom he has murdered
- After a desperate fight at the Battle of Bosworth Field, Richard is killed and Richmond becomes King Henry VII — the first Tudor monarch



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# King John

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# King John (1594-96)

- *King John* synopsis: **First Written:** 1594-96. Genre: History
- As the play begins, King John, with the aid of his mother (Queen Eleanor), has stolen the crown from his nephew Arthur
- The king of France demands that Arthur be made king and threatens war if John does not agree
- Meanwhile, two brothers, Philip and Robert Faulconbridge, rival their inheritance; Eleanor sees the likeness between Philip and her late son King Richard
- After the dispute settles, Eleanor reveals that Philip is King Richard's son and her grandchild; Philip is knighted and renamed Sir Richard Plantagenet
- Sir Richard (the Bastard) becomes John's staunchest military commander after war breaks out with France
- The fighting is resolved by Lewis, the heir to the French throne, marrying John's niece Blanche; though, it fails to end the war
- With England victorious, young Arthur becomes King John's captive; however, it risks becoming a rallying point for his enemies
- So, John orders Arthur killed, but Hubert spares him out of compassion, only for him to later die in a tragic fall while trying to escape
- Cardinal Pandulph makes the French invade England unless John agrees to his demands; he finally agrees, but Lewis refuses to call off the French invasion
- John, increasingly weak and uncertain, grows ill; only the Bastard fights on until news comes that a traitorous monk has poisoned John
- Only after Prince Henry becomes king, the Bastard at last accepts that peace is at hand and pledges loyalty to the new king



# Romeo and Juliet





# Romeo and Juliet (1594-96)

- *Romeo and Juliet* synopsis; **First Written**: 1594-96. Genre: Tragedy
- The hero and heroine of the play *Romeo and Juliet* are the archetypes of “star-crossed” lovers in Western literature, music, dance, and theater
- Their noble families, the Montagues and the Capulets, are bitter enemies, which leads the young pair to their tragic fates
- The play is staged in Verona, Italy, where a Capulet, Juliet, and a Montague, Romeo, fall in love at a masked ball, later marrying in secrecy
- After Tybalt, a Capulet, kills Romeo’s friend Mercutio, Romeo kills Tybalt and is banished to Mantua; Juliet’s father then demands that she marry Count Paris
- Juliet, on Friar Laurence’s advice, takes a potion that makes a person seem dead, hoping that Romeo in that manner would finally rescue her
- Unaware, Romeo hears of Juliet’s apparent death and returns to Verona; however, after killing Count Paris, he finds Juliet in a burial vault
- Dispairing, he takes poison and dies; Juliet awakens, sees the dead Romeo, and kills herself
- Their families learn what has happened and end their lifelong feud for good



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# A Midsummer Night's Dream

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## **A Midsummer Night's Dream (1595-96)**

- *A Midsummer Night's Dream* synopsis; **First Written:** 1595-96. Genre: Comedy
- The play begins as Theseus, the ruler of Athens, is about to marry Hippolyta, the Amazon queen
- Meanwhile, Hermia and Lysander, love-struck, flee to a forest outside Athens after Hermia's father demands that she marry Demetrius
- Helena, who is in love with Demetrius, tells him that Hermia is in the forest; he goes looking for her and Helena follows
- Meanwhile, Oberon, the king of the fairies, fights with his queen, Titania
- Later, he orders his servant Puck to place a magic potion in the eyes of Titania and Demetrius so the two will fall in love with the first person each sees
- He hopes not only to punish Titania for her disobedience but also to help Demetrius to fall in love with Helena again
- Puck, however, mistakenly puts the magic drops in Lysander's eyes instead of Demetrius's and makes him fall in love with Helena
- Now both Lysander and Demetrius are in love with Helena, but she thinks they are making fun of her and is therefore humiliated
- In the same forest, a bevy of actors is preparing a play for Theseus's wedding; the impish Puck gives one of the actors, Nick Bottom, a donkey's head
- When Titania awakes, the first person she sees is Bottom; after much confusion, Oberon restores everyone in the forest to their original state
- Theseus invites the two couples (Hermia with Lysander and Helena with Demetrius) to marry while he weds Hippolyta





# Richard II



# Richard II (1595-96)

- *Richard II* synopsis; **First Written**: 1595-96. Genre: History
- In this play, Richard II is seen as a weak ruler whose incompetence is overpowered by his conniving but more capable cousin Bolingbroke
- It is first in a series of four history plays that recount major events of English history of the late 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries
- At the start of the plot, Richard exiles two feuding noblemen, Thomas Mowbray and his cousin Henry Bolingbroke
- Bolingbroke's father, John of Gaunt, who is also Richard's uncle, was the founder of the house of Lancaster
- When Gaunt dies, Richard nabs his fortune to finance a war against the Irish, rousing Bolingbroke to invade England with his own armies
- Richard's last surviving uncle is Edmund of Langley, duke of York, who was the founder of the house of York
- York serves as regent in the king's absence but then allies with Bolingbroke on behalf of himself and his son, the Duke of Aumerle
- Aumerle, however, proves loyal to Richard; Richard ultimately surrenders to Bolingbroke, who becomes King Henry IV
- As a prisoner, Richard delivers a soliloquy on the meaning of his suffering, rediscovering his pride, trust, and courage; he is later murdered
- It ends with the new king asking after his feckless son, Prince Hal, and promising to make a pilgrimage to atone for Richard's murder



# The Merchant of Venice





# The Merchant of Venice (1596-97)

- *The Merchant of Venice* synopsis; **First Written:** 1596-97. Genre: Comedy
- The play opens as Bassanio, a poor Venetian noble, asks his friend Antonio, a wealthy merchant, for a loan, so as to marry the wealthy Portia
- Antonio has invested all his money in his ships and their voyages, so he borrows the money Bassanio needs from Shylock
- Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, gives Antonio the money on condition that Antonio repay on time lest he lose a pound of his own flesh
- Meanwhile, Bassanio passes Portia's father's test by correctly selecting a casket that contains her portrait, and the two marry
- News arrives that Antonio's ships have been lost at sea — all his investments are lost, too
- Shylock demands his pound of flesh from Antonio, knowing full well that it will surely result in Antonio's death
- Shylock wants vengeance partly because the Christians of the play banded together to help Shylock's daughter marry the Christian Lorenzo
- However, Portia, disguised as a lawyer, stops Shylock by proving that legally he must take flesh only, and Shylock must die if any blood is spilled
- Thus, the contract is canceled, and Shylock is ordered to give half his money to Antonio
- Antonio agrees not to take Shylock's money if Shylock converts to Christianity and mends his relationship with his daughter, to which Shylock agrees
- The play ends when news arrives that some of Antonio's ships have arrived safely home



# Henry IV Part 1





## Henry IV Part 1 (1596-97)

- *Henry IV Part 1* synopsis; **First Written**: 1596-97. Genre: Comedy
- In *Part 1*, King Henry learns that Owen Glendower, the Welsh chieftain, has captured Edmund Mortimer, the Earl of March
- Henry Percy, known as Hotspur, has refused to release his Scottish prisoners until the king ransoms Mortimer
- Henry laments that his own son is not like the fearless Hotspur
- Glendower, Mortimer (now married to Glendower's daughter), and Hotspur (now allied with the Welsh) conspire to trisect Henry's kingdom
- Meanwhile, Prince Hal and his cronies, the comic Falstaff and his sidekick, are playing childish pranks at Mistress Quickly's inn in London
- Hal is called to his father's aid in the war against the Welsh and the Percys
- Hal and his father manage to make up their differences, at least for a time, when Hal saves the life of his father in combat
- Hal further proves his valor in battle, where he scolds the drunk and idle Falstaff and then kills Hotspur during the Battle of Shrewsbury
- At the play's end, rebellion has been only temporarily averted



# Henry IV Part 2





## Henry IV Part 2 (1597-98)

- *Henry IV Part 2* synopsis; **First Written:** 1597-98. Genre: History
- When *Part 2* opens, Henry's son John of Lancaster is leading the ongoing war, and the swaggering Falstaff has become even more outrageous
- Hal goes to Eastcheap in disguise to spy on his old friends, to his father's later dismay
- News then comes that Prince John has settled the war
- After a misunderstanding in which Hal — thinking his father has died — removes the crown from the king's pillow and leaves the sickroom
- Father and son are thus reconciled on the king's deathbed
- The wily Henry advises Hal to avoid domestic conflict during his own reign by seeking foreign quarrels
- As Hal prepares to become king, he casts off his frivolous image and assumes one of greater dignity
- Falstaff arrives with his entourage, expecting a generous welcome from his old friend
- Instead, Hal, now King Henry V, denounces Falstaff and sends him and his cronies to prison until they have reformed
- As they are led away, Prince John predicts war with France; the story is continued in *Henry V*



# The Merry Wives of Windsor





## **The Merry Wives of Windsor (1597-1601)**

- *The Merry Wives of Windsor* synopsis; **First Written:** 1597-1601. Genre: Comedy
- In the comedy, Falstaff takes a fancy to two married women, Mistresses Page and Ford
- Hoping to swindle them, Falstaff writes identical love letters to each; he seeks Pistol's and Nym's help, but is instead scorned by them
- When Falstaff fires them from his service, they go off and inform the husbands of Mistresses Page and Ford of Falstaff's plot
- The wives compare their letters and resolve to trick the "greasy knight," and thus twice they fool Falstaff
- Mistress Ford lets her husband in on the joke at last, and the two couples, the Pages and the Fords, plan one more ruse at Falstaff's expense
- The play's plot centers on the wooing of Anne, the Pages' daughter, who has three other suitors: Doctor Caius, Slender, and Fenton
- To great comic effect, all three suitors use Mistress Quickly (Caius's servant) to argue their case to young Anne
- In the climactic scene, Falstaff dresses himself absurdly as Herne the Hunter, laced with stag's horns, expecting a tryst
- The women and their husbands, however, with a group of friends, including Anne Page, dress up as witches and fairies to spook him
- The marriage plans conceived by Master and Mistress Page are foiled when Anne elopes with the suitor of her choice, Fenton
- All identities are revealed in the end; Fenton is welcomed into the Page family and Falstaff is forgiven



# Much Ado About Nothing





## Much Ado About Nothing (1598-99)

- *Much Ado About Nothing* synopsis; **First Written**: 1598-99. Genre: Comedy
- It is a contrast between the conventional Claudio and Hero, who have the usual expectations of each other
- Also, it presents a contrast between Beatrice and Benedick, who are skeptical of romance, courtship, and, seemingly, each other
- Claudio is deceived by the jealous Don John into believing that Hero is prepared to abandon him for Claudio's friend and mentor, Don Pedro
- Don John's plot is eventually unveiled by the bumbling constable Dogberry and his humorous sidekicks
- Meanwhile, Beatrice and Benedick have "a kind of merry war" between them
- They like to match wits in clever repartee that anticipates other playfully teasing literary couples
- Each is tricked into believing that the other is in love, which allows the true affection between them to grow
- At the play's end, both couples are united
- While the play is full of deliberate confusions and mistaken identities, the audience is aware of the truth; only the characters remain confused



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**As You Like It**

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## As You Like It (1598-1600)

- *As You Like It* synopsis; **First Written:** 1598-1600. Genre: Comedy
- The play is set in two places: the royal court, which Frederick has stolen from his brother, and the nearby Forest of Arden
- Frederick's brother, known as Duke Senior, is hiding in the forest with his followers; his daughter, Rosalind, however, still lives at the court
- Rosalind is in love with the nobleman Orlando; however, he is devoid of noble upbringing and education due to his brother, Oliver
- Upon learning Oliver intends to murder him, Orlando runs away to the forest; shortly thereafter, Rosalind is thrown out of court
- She too flees to the Forest of Arden, accompanied by her cousin Celia and the jester Touchstone
- Rosalind is pretending to be a young man named Ganymede when she meets Orlando in the forest; Orlando desperately misses his love
- Rather than revealing her identity, Rosalind plays a trick on Orlando by saying she can cure him of his lovesickness
- Oliver arrives intending to kill Orlando but regrets his actions after Orlando saves him from a hungry lioness and a snake
- Oliver then falls in love with Celia, whom he does not recognize; the women reveal their identities, and both sets of lovers are married
- In the end, word arrives that Frederick has repented, and Duke Senior and his family are allowed to return to court



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# Henry V

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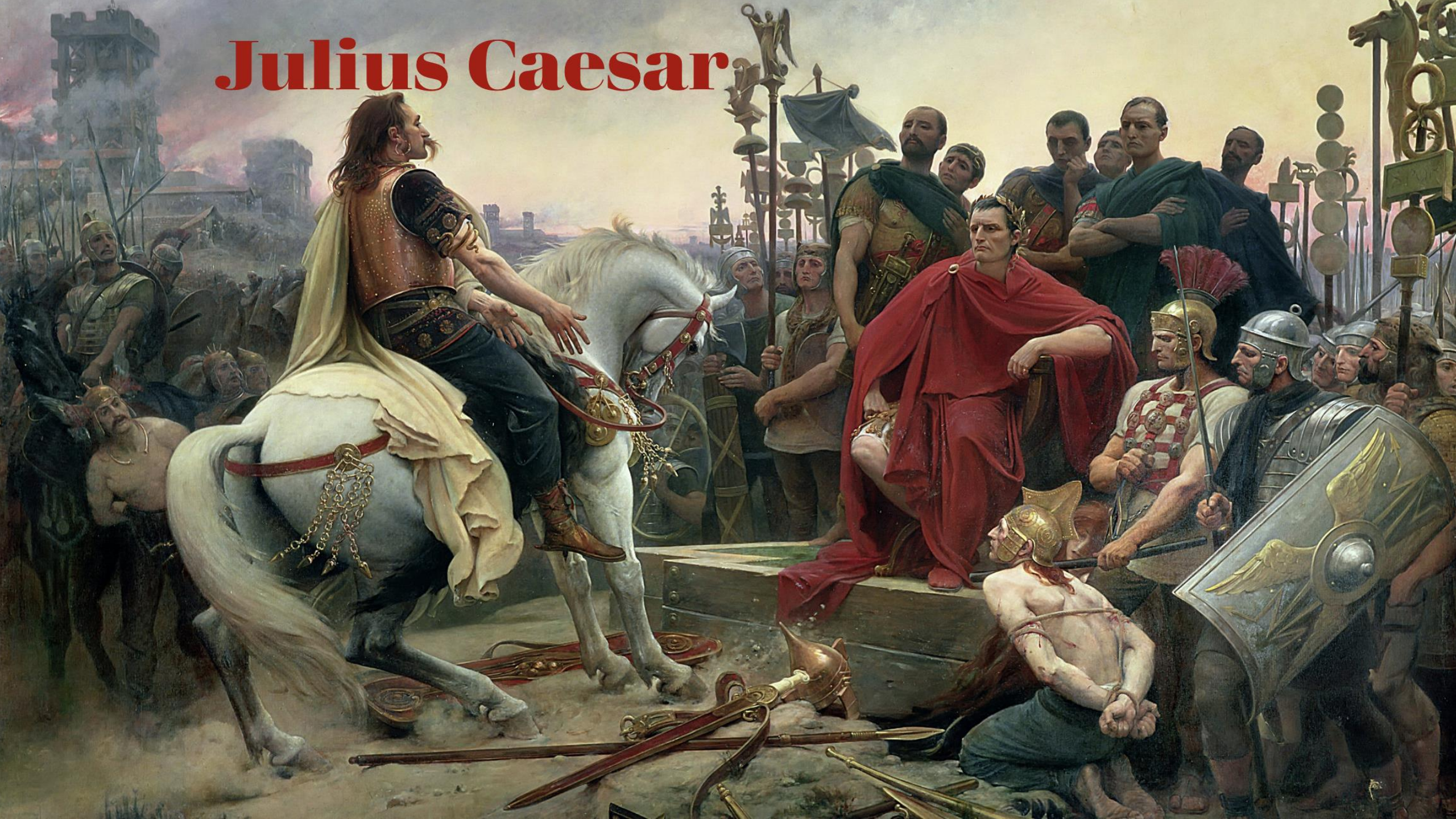


# Henry V (1599)

- *Henry V* synopsis; **First Written:** 1599. Genre: History
- The play *Henry V* follows the reign of the English King in the early 1400s, up to his marriage with Princess Katharine of France
- It is last in a series of four plays — the others being *Richard II* and *Henry IV, Part 1* and *Part 2*
- On his father's advice to seek foreign quarrels so as to maintain peace at home, he vows to reclaim the lands in France once held by England
- The action of the play culminates in Henry's successful campaign in France with his ragtag army
- The depiction of Henry's character, however, dominates the play:
  - Be it in his nervous watch before the decisive Battle of Agincourt, when he walks disguised among his soldiers and prays for victory
  - Or be it in his courtship of Princess Katharine, which is romantic and tender even though the marriage was for a political alliance
- The king's speech to his troops before battle on St. Crispin's Day is particularly famous for its evocation of a brotherhood in arms
- However, Shakespeare has placed this speech in a context full of ironies and challenging contrasts
- In the end, the chorus reminds the audience that England would be plunged into civil war during the reign of Henry V's son, Henry VI



# Julius Caesar





# Julius Caesar (1599-1600)

- *Julius Caesar* synopsis; **First Written**: 1599-1600. Genre: Tragedy
- It takes place after Caesar's return to Rome from putting down a rebellion against the Roman Empire in what are now Spain and Portugal
- The statesman Caius Cassius envies Caesar's growing power and fears what he perceives as Caesar's ambition to make himself king
- So he forms a conspiracy among the Roman republicans to kill Caesar
- Brutus is reluctantly persuaded to join them, believing that Caesar's death would be for the greater good of Rome:
  - "And therefore think him as a serpent's egg / Which, hatched, would, as his kind, grow mischievous; / And kill him in the shell."
- The conspirators stab Caesar to death in the Senate on March 15, the "ides of March."
- At the thrust of Brutus' knife, the dying Caesar utters the famous "*Et tu, Brutè?* [And you, Brutus?] Then fall, Caesar!"
- Mark Antony gives a stirring funeral oration, a masterpiece of rhetoric, using irony to persuade the crowd to turn against the conspirators
- Antony, Lepidus, and Caesar's nephew Octavius form a triumvirate (a ruling body of three people) to govern Rome
- Finally, Brutus and Cassius are defeated at the Battle of Philippi, where they kill themselves to avoid further dishonor



# Hamlet





## Hamlet (1599-1601)

- *Hamlet* synopsis; **First Written**: 1599-1601. Genre: Tragedy
- Hamlet is mourning his father, the king of Denmark, and lamenting that his mother, Gertrude, married his uncle Claudius much too soon
- The ghost of Hamlet's father appears to Hamlet, informs him that he was poisoned by Claudius, and commands Hamlet to avenge his death
- Hamlet decides to seek evidence of foul play that would support the charges made by the ghostly vision, which he suspects as the Devil in disguise
- He feigns madness as a way of deceiving Claudius and others at court, seemingly lovesick over Polonius's daughter Ophelia
- Hamlet doubts Ophelia's sincerity, so he feigns madness and treats her cruelly as if she symbolized, like his own mother, of her "treacherous" sex
- Hamlet contrives a plan to test the ghost's accusation; he stages a play of a similar story recounted by the ghost, which unnerves Claudius
- After the performance, Hamlet confronts his mother over her loyalty to Claudius and mistakenly kills the eavesdropping Polonius
- Sensing danger, Claudius has Hamlet sent to England, and orders him killed in secret; however, Hamlet foils the attack
- On his return to Denmark, Hamlet hears that Ophelia is dead of a suspected suicide; Polonius's son, Laertes, seeks to avenge his father's murder
- During the duel, Hamlet and Laertes are struck by the sword that Claudius has had dipped in poison
- Before Hamlet himself dies, he manages to stab Claudius and to entrust the clearing of his honor to his friend Horatio





# Twelfth Night

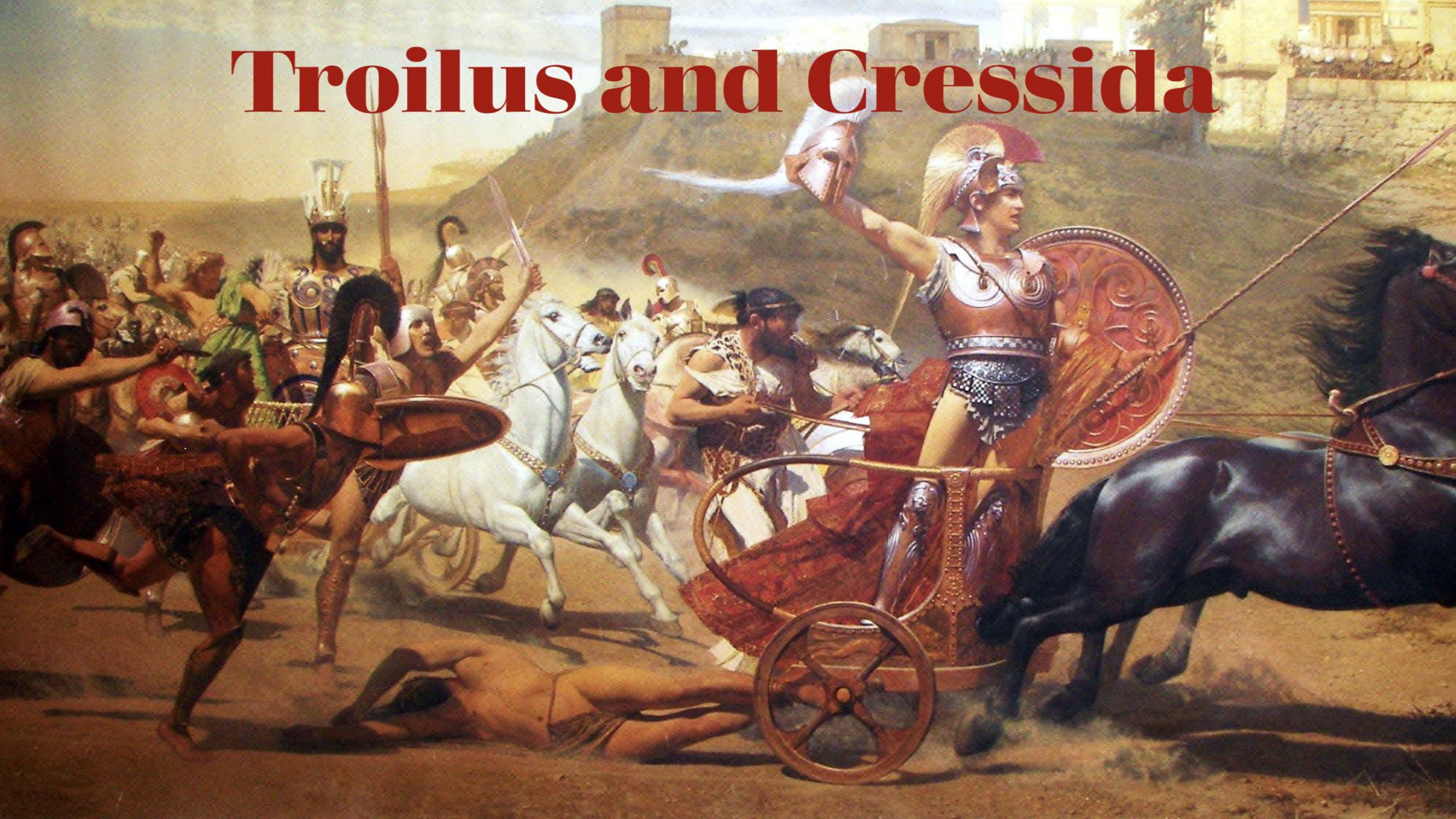


## Twelfth Night (1600-02)

- *Twelfth Night* synopsis; **First Written:** 1600-02. Genre: Comedy
- Often considered one of Shakespeare's finest comedies, *Twelfth Night* precedes most of his great tragedies and his romances in order of composition
- When twins Sebastian and Viola are separated during a shipwreck, each believes the other dead
- Viola disguises herself as a boy named Cesario and enters the service of Duke Orsino, who thinks he is in love with Lady Olivia
- Orsino sends Viola/Cesario to plead his cause to Olivia, who promptly falls in love with the messenger
- Viola, meanwhile, is in love with Orsino
- When her twin, Sebastian, is rediscovered, many comic situations of mistaken identity ensue
- There is a humorous subplot involving the members of Lady Olivia's household, who scheme to undermine the high-minded, pompous Malvolio
- This character is often thought to be a portrayal of a Puritan, the types who were threatening to close down the theaters during Shakespeare's day
- At the play's end, Malvolio is the only solitary figure among the pairs of happy lovers



# Troilus and Cressida





## Troilus and Cressida (1601-02)

- *Troilus and Cressida* synopsis; **First Written**: 1601-02. Genre: Problem Play
- The play takes place during a war between the invading Greeks and the Trojans
- Cressida, a Trojan woman whose father has joined the Greek army, pledges her love to Troilus, one of Trojan King Priam's sons
- Cressida's father, however, forces her to move to the Greek camp
- She is courted by Diomedes, a Greek soldier sent to make sure she reaches the camp safely
- Although she loves Troilus, she has no choice but to accept the attentions of Diomedes
- There are few women in the Greek camp, and Cressida, to ward off the other men, wants to be seen involved with a powerful warrior
- The war is portrayed as a senseless fight, and many of the famous characters from Greek myth are shown to be cruel, selfish, and arrogant
- Paris and Helen, who sparked the war by leaving her Greek husband to live with the Trojan prince, seem only to care about themselves
- The hero Achilles is shown murdering Hector while the Trojan is defenseless
- The battles continue until the end of the play, where all sense of order and morality is seen to have disintegrated



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# All's Well That Ends Well

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## All's Well That Ends Well (1601-05)

- *All's Well That Ends Well* synopsis; **First Written:** 1601-05. Genre: Comedy
- The play concerns the efforts of Helena, daughter of a renowned physician, to make Bertram, the count of Rossillion, her husband
- When Bertram is summoned by the gravely ill king of France, Helena follows and administers a cure that had been provided by her father
- In return, the king invites her to select a husband, her choice being the evasive Bertram
- The young man, unwilling to marry below his social status, gives in to the king's order but promptly flees to military action in Tuscany
- By letter Bertram informs Helena that he may not be considered her husband until she has taken the ring from his finger and conceived a child by him
- Disguised as a pilgrim, Helena follows Bertram to Florence, only to discover that he has been courting Diana, the daughter of her hostess
- Helena spreads a rumor of her own death and arranges a rendezvous with Bertram in which she substitutes herself for Diana
- In exchange for his ring, she gives him one that the king has given her
- When Bertram returns to Rossillion, where the king is visiting the countess, the royal guest recognizes the ring and suspects foul play
- Helena then appears to explain her machinations and claim her rightful spouse



# Measure for Measure





## Measure for Measure (1603-04)

- *Measure for Measure* synopsis; **First Written:** 1603-04. Genre: Comedy
- The play begins when the kind duke of Vienna, Vincentio, tells his deputy, Angelo, to govern while he takes a trip to Poland
- In reality, Vincentio does not actually leave Vienna; instead, he stays on disguised as a friar so as to watch what happens
- Angelo is draconian by nature; for example, he sentences Claudio to death for getting his fiancée, Juliet, pregnant
- Claudio's sister, Isabella, pleads Angelo for clemency, but he will consider it on condition that she sleep with him; Isabella, a novice, refuses
- In the end, she arranges for Mariana, Angelo's former fiancée whom he left after she became poor, to sleep with Angelo instead
- Angelo, however, reneges later and vows to kill Claudio anyway, so Vincentio decides it is time for him to return to governing
- He pretends to return to the city from his journey, fires Angelo, and forces him to marry Mariana
- Claudio, having been saved from execution, is allowed to marry Juliet, with other wrongdoers in the city brought to justice
- The play closes as Vincentio asks Isabella to give up being a nun and marry him
- Whether she says yes, however, is not indicated in the play, leaving the decision up to each group of actors who give the performance



# Othello





# Othello (1603-04)

- *Othello* synopsis; **First Written**: 1603-04. Genre: Tragedy
- The play begins when black Venetian general Othello appoints Cassio as his chief lieutenant instead of Iago
- Iago is jealous of Othello and Cassio and plots their downfall by making it appear that Othello's wife, Desdemona, is having an affair with Cassio
- Iago tricks his wife, Emilia, and convinces Roderigo, another man jealous of Othello's success, to help
- Emilia finds one of Desdemona's handkerchiefs, which Iago brings to Othello as evidence of Desdemona and Cassio's supposed affair
- Iago also convinces Othello to eavesdrop on Cassio as Cassio talks about the woman he loves
- Othello assumes Cassio is talking about Desdemona, although in reality he is talking about a woman named Bianca
- These incidents convince Othello of what he has feared all along:
  - The age and race differences between them might have caused Desdemona to lose interest in him
- Furious and jealous, Othello kills Desdemona only to learn later from Emilia, though, that his wife has in fact been blameless
- In the end, he asks to be remembered as one who "loved not wisely but too well" and kills himself



# King Lear



Note: From *King Lear Act I Scene I*, by E. Abbey, 1898, (<https://bit.ly/3wFqrPW>). © 2021 by The MET.



# King Lear (1605-06)

- *King Lear* synopsis; **First Written**: 1605-06. Genre: Tragedy
- The plot of the tragedy concerns the aging King Lear, who decides to divide his kingdom among his three daughters
- He will allot each daughter a portion of the kingdom in proportion to the eloquence of her declaration of love for him
- The hypocritical Goneril and Regan make grand pronouncements and are rewarded
- Cordelia, the youngest daughter, who truly loves Lear, refuses to make an insincere speech to prove her love
- Cordelia is thus disinherited; the two older sisters mock Lear and renege on their promise to support him
- Cast out, the king slips into madness and wanders about accompanied by his faithful Fool
- He is aided by the Earl of Kent, who, though banished for having supported Cordelia, has remained in Britain disguised as a loyalist of the king
- Cordelia has married the king of France; she is obliged to invade her native country with a French army in order to rescue her neglected father
- When she is brought to Lear, she cares for him and helps him regain his reason
- When Cordelia's army is defeated, she and her father are taken into custody



# Timon of Athens





## Timon of Athens (1605-08)

- *Timon of Athens* synopsis; **First Performed**: 1605-08. Genre: Tragedy
- The plot of *Timon of Athens* is relatively simple and follows only one person, unlike many of Shakespeare's other plays
- It tells the story of Timon, a man known for his great and universal generosity, who spends his fortune and then is refused when he needs help
- He puts on a feast, invites his so-called friends, serves them warm water, and throws it in their faces
- Leaving Athens filled with hatred, he goes to live in a cave
- There he is visited by his loyal servant Flavius, by the rude philosopher Apemantus, and by two mistresses of the general Alcibiades
- They all sympathize to some extent with Timon, but he refuses to return to society
- One day Timon uncovers gold, most of which he gives to Alcibiades' mistresses and to Alcibiades himself for his war against Athens
- Word of his fortune reaches Athens, and, as a variety of Athenians come to ask Timon for money again, he curses them and dies



# Macbeth





## Macbeth (1606-07)

- *Macbeth* synopsis; **First Written:** 1606-07. Genre: Tragedy
- Near the start of the play, Macbeth and Banquo, who are generals serving the Scottish King Duncan, meet three witches known as the Weird Sisters
- The witches prophesy that Macbeth, who is thane (or lord) of Glamis, will also become thane of Cawdor, then king, and that Banquo will beget kings
- Shortly thereafter, Macbeth discovers that he has indeed been made thane of Cawdor, which leads him to believe the rest of the prophecy
- Macbeth is undone by his inability to hold his own moral ground and by his need to be regarded as valiant by his wife, Lady Macbeth
- Spurred by his wife, Macbeth kills King Duncan while he is a guest at Macbeth's castle, Dunsinane
- Duncan's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, flee the country, fearing for their own lives; thereafter, Malcolm raises an army in England to fight Macbeth
- The speedy departure of Malcolm and Donalbain seems to implicate them in the crime, however, and Macbeth becomes king
- Worried by the witches' prophecy that Banquo will beget kings, Macbeth hires killers to murder Banquo and his son, though the son escapes
- Banquo's ghost haunts Macbeth, and Lady Macbeth is driven to madness by her guilt
- Lady Macbeth dies, and Macbeth is killed in battle by Macduff; Malcolm then becomes the rightful king



# Antony and Cleopatra



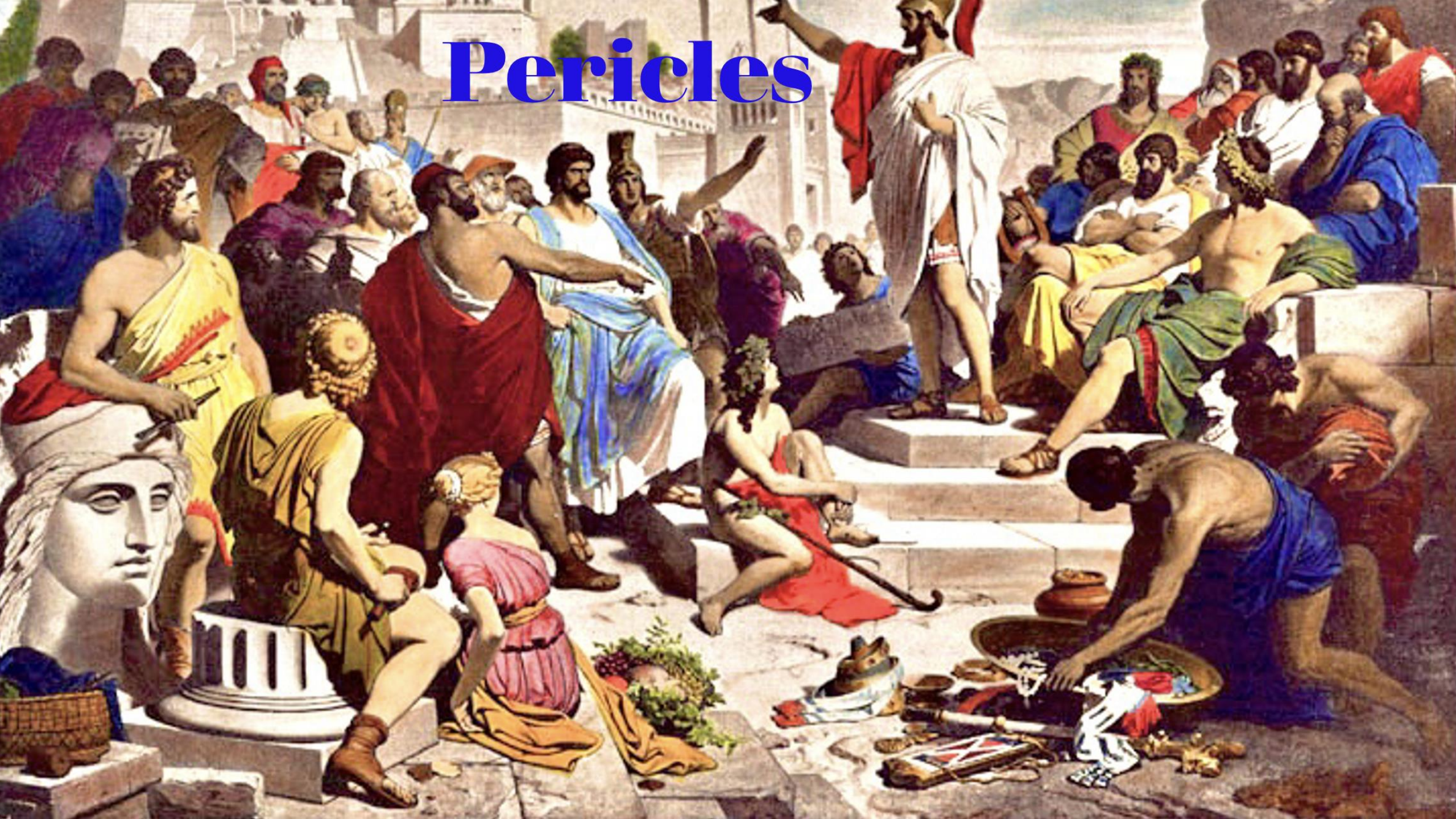


## Antony and Cleopatra (1606-07)

- *Antony and Cleopatra* synopsis; **First Written:** 1606-07. Genre: Tragedy
- It is about the love affair between Mark Antony, the Roman military leader and triumvir, and Cleopatra, the queen of Egypt
- Cleopatra is notorious for having charmed some of the great men of her era, including Caesar; Antony himself loves her passionately
- Antony, however, is married to Fulvia, who is an enemy of Antony's fellow triumvir, Octavius Caesar
- While Antony is in Egypt with Cleopatra, he receives word that Fulvia has died, and he must return to Rome
- There he marries Octavius's sister Octavia in an attempt to heal the political rift; Cleopatra is furious when she hears about the marriage
- War breaks out between Octavius and Antony, and Antony returns to Cleopatra
- She accompanies him to the Battle of Actium, where her presence causes a military disaster
- She returns to Egypt, and Antony follows, pursued by Octavius; Octavius clearly has the upper hand, so even Antony's allies are switching sides
- Octavius defeats Antony in Alexandria, and Cleopatra misinforms Antony of her suicide; mistaken, Antony tries to kill himself, too
- Mortally wounded, he is carried back to Cleopatra and dies in her arms
- Grieving Antony and unwilling to be captured by Octavius, Cleopatra uses a poisonous snake to kill herself, though, this time for real



# Pericles



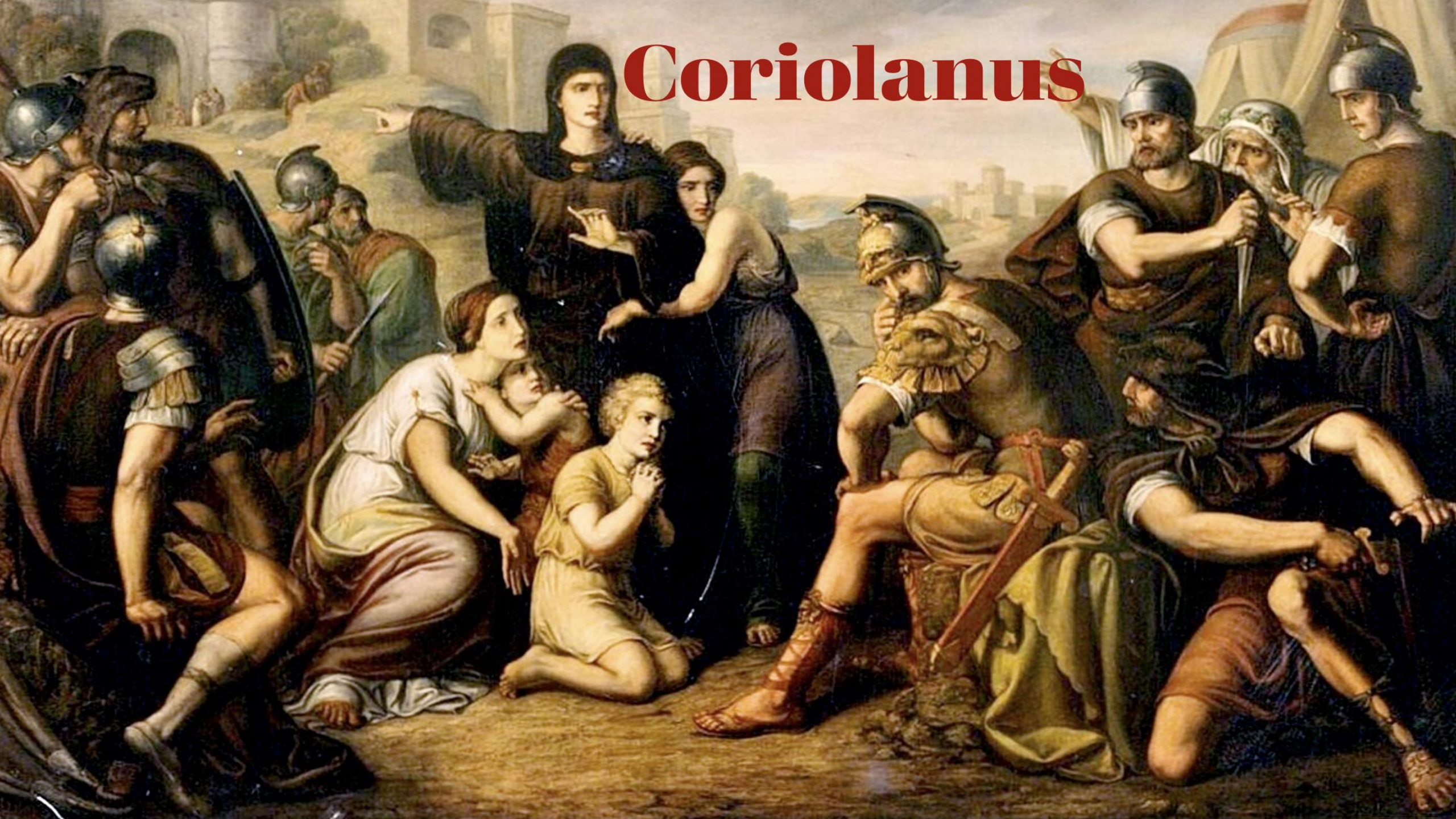


## Pericles (1606-08)

- *Pericles* synopsis; **First Written**: 1606-08. Genre: Romance
- The play opens as Pericles, the Greek hero, seeks to marry the princess of Antioch
- He is forced to flee when he discovers that King Antiochus is also in love with the princess, who is his own daughter
- On his travels, Pericles is shipwrecked near Pentapolis, where he falls in love with the beautiful Princess Thaisa and marries her
- As the couple sail back to Tyre, Thaisa gives birth to Marina during a violent storm; Pericles, believing Thaisa has died in childbirth, buries her at sea
- She is rescued, however; heartbroken, Pericles leaves his newborn daughter with Cleon, the governor of Tarsus, and his wife, Dionyza
- Marina, now a young woman, is hated by Dionyza, who orders her murdered; Instead, Marina is kidnapped by pirates and sold into slavery
- She is reunited with her father when he is brought to her, unable to speak and sick from years of grief
- After guidance from the goddess Diana, Pericles finds his wife in Ephesus; the family is reunited at the close of the play
- A recurring theme of the play is the proper relationship between parent and child, especially between father and daughter
- Shakespeare returned to this theme often in his other late plays



# Coriolanus





# Coriolanus (1608)

- *Coriolanus* synopsis; **First Written**: 1608. Genre: Tragedy
- The five-act play is based on the life of Caius (or Gnaeus) Marcius Coriolanus, a legendary Roman hero of the late 6th and early 5th centuries BC
- *Coriolanus* is unusual in as much as it follows only one person, and most key moments occur in silence
- The action of the play follows Caius Marcius (later called Caius Marcius Coriolanus) through several phases of his career
- As a young nobleman, he is arrogant; however, he becomes rather gallant after he joins a war against the city of Corioli
- He is persuaded to run for consul, a leader of the Roman people, although he does not want to
- He refuses to flatter Roman citizens or show them his war wounds to get elected; insulted by his attitude, the Romans banish him
- Coriolanus becomes angry and joins forces with an old enemy, Aufidius, who wants to conquer Rome
- Coriolanus is finally persuaded by his mother, Volumnia — who brings with her Coriolanus's wife, Virgilia, and his son — to make peace with Rome
- Aufidius sees this as a betrayal, however, and convinces his men to kill Coriolanus



# Cymbeline





## Cymbeline (1608-10)

- *Cymbeline* synopsis ; **First Written**: 1608-10. Genre: Romance
- Cymbeline is the king of Britain; he decides that his daughter, Imogen, must marry his horrid stepson, Cloten
- Cymbeline learns that Imogen is secretly married to Posthumus, so he banishes him to Rome, where he meets a villainous Italian named Iachimo
- Posthumus finds himself drawn unwisely into betting Iachimo that Imogen will remain faithful to her marriage, no matter what
- Journeying to England, Iachimo tries unsuccessfully to persuade Imogen to cheat on her husband with him
- He then steals a bracelet from Imogen while she is asleep; Iachimo uses the bracelet to convince Posthumus of her infidelity
- Posthumus sends a servant to kill Imogen, but the servant instead warns her of the plan; Imogen disguises herself as a young boy called Fidele
- She sets out for Rome but loses her way in Wales; there she encounters Belarius, who had been banished by Cymbeline, and her two brothers
- Posthumus (who has left Rome), Imogen, and her brothers are caught up in the advance of the Roman army; lastly, Cymbeline's army is victorious
- In the end, Posthumus and Imogen are reunited; Cymbeline is reconciled to all his beleaguered family and to Belarius as well
- Cymbeline's now-dead queen is revealed to have been thoroughly wicked, and her son Cloten has died at the hands of one of Cymbeline's sons



# The Winter's Tale





# The winter's Tale (1609-11)

- *The winter's Tale* synopsis; **First Written:** 1609-11. Genre: Romance
- The play opens as Leontes, the king of Sicilia, entertains his old friend Polixenes, the king of Bohemia
- Leontes, mistakenly believes that his wife, Hermione, and his friend, are having an affair, so he plots to kill Polixenes
- Polixenes manages to escape with the help of Leontes' servant, Camillo, who had been ordered to kill Polixenes
- Leontes throws his pregnant wife in jail and refuses to believe she is innocent of the accusations
- When she gives birth, Leontes refuses to see his daughter and instead orders a servant to leave the child in a wild place to die
- Upset by his father's treatment of his mother, Leontes' young son Mamillius dies, and, purportedly, so does Hermione
- Leontes realizes he has lost his entire family and grieves; meanwhile, a shepherd in Bohemia has been raising Hermione's baby daughter, Perdita
- The play returns several years later, when Perdita is a young woman and has fallen in love with Prince Florizel, Polixenes' son
- The two decide to wed despite Polixenes' disapproval and run away to Sicilia; upon arriving at Leontes' court, Perdita's identity is revealed
- Paulina, a servant, reveals that she has hidden Hermione while Leontes suffered the consequences of his jealousy and rashness
- Seemingly by magic, Paulina turns a "statue" of Hermione into the living queen, who is reunited with her daughter and husband



# The Tempest





# The Tempest (1611)

- *The Tempest* synopsis; **First Written:** 1611. Genre: Romance
- Prospero, the rightful duke of Milan, has magical powers; however, his brother Antonio usurped him with the help of Alonso, the king of Naples
- Antonio set Prospero and his young daughter Miranda adrift on the sea; Prospero magically frees the spirit Ariel, who had been tormented by a sorceress
- The son of the sorceress, Caliban, became Prospero's slave; the play opens with a storm that Prospero raises magically
- It was to drive Antonio and his courtiers to the island; when Ariel brings them ashore, the process of testing and eventual reconciliation begins
- But Ferdinand, Alonso's son, is separated from the others, who believe Ferdinand has drowned
- Meanwhile, Caliban plots against Prospero, and Antonio plots against Alonso; Ariel helps foil both plots
- Before Ferdinand is discovered, Alonso comes to believe that the loss of his son is punishment for his crimes, and he repents
- Finally, Prospero is convinced that Antonio and the others are also repentant; Prospero reconciles everyone, gives up his magic, and returns to his throne
- Meanwhile, young Ferdinand has encountered Miranda, and the two have fallen instantly in love
- Prospero gladly welcomes their relationship, as their marriage will unite the two contending kingdoms of Milan and Naples



# The Two Noble Kinsmen





## The Two Noble Kinsmen (1612-14)

- *The Two Noble Kinsmen* synopsis; **First Written:** 1612-14. Genre: Romance
- The play is set during a war between the Greek kingdoms of Athens and Thebes
- Two nephews of the Theban king Creon, Palamon and Arcite, are captured by the Athenians; while in prison, they become friends
- They become bitter rivals, though, when the two glimpse Emilia, the sister of the Amazon queen Hippolyta, through the window
- Arcite is unexpectedly released from jail and banished, but he returns to Athens in disguise in the hopes of winning Emilia
- Palamon too escapes from jail with the help of the Jailer's Daughter, who is in love with him
- Arcite and Palamon continue to fight over Emilia, while she is unable to choose between them
- At last, Theseus, the duke of Athens (and Emilia's brother-in-law) announces a tournament for her hand — the loser will be executed
- Arcite wins but is killed in a fall from his horse; before he dies, the two young noblemen are reconciled, and Arcite gives his bride to his friend
- Meanwhile, the abandoned Jailer's Daughter, distraught from love for Palamon, goes mad
- She is saved by a devoted but unnamed Wooer, who courts her disguised as Palamon



# Henry VIII





# Henry VIII (1613)

- *Henry VIII* synopsis; **First Written**: 1613. Genre: History
- The duke of Buckingham and his son-in-law are arrested for having accused Cardinal Wolsey, King Henry VIII's lord chancellor, of corruption and treason
- Although the king is unsure and Queen Katharine pleads for truth and justice, the duke is convicted as a traitor after a former servant lies to the court
- As Buckingham is taken away for execution, he conveys a prophetic warning to beware of false friends
- Henry falls in love with the beautiful Anne Boleyn and, concerned over his lack of a male heir, considers leaving his wife
- Separately, a reluctant Anne accepts the king's marriage proposal; Wolsey tries to prevent the marriage, but he is soon found out
- As he leaves the court, Wolsey encourages his servant Thomas Cromwell to work for Henry, who soon promotes Cromwell to high office
- Anne is married to Henry in secret and is crowned queen; although, Katharine maintains her dignity through it all, it was to no avail
- The new lord chancellor attempts to regain power over the king by accusing Thomas Cranmer, Henry's loyal archbishop of Canterbury, of heresy
- The king is no longer so easily manipulated, however, and Cranmer reveals to the plotters a ring he holds as a mark of the king's favor
- The play ends with Henry's newborn daughter's baptism and Cranmer's prophecy of England's glory under the future Queen Elizabeth I



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