

Shakespeare Shorts

Readers' Theater Series

Grades 4-6

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All About William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare was born on April 23, 1564, in the town of Stratford-Upon-Avon, in England. We remember him today, more than 440 years after he was born, for the poems and plays that he wrote.

Very little is known about Shakespeare's childhood, other than that his parents were John Shakespeare and Mary Arden, and that he was educated at the local grammar school. The house in which he was born still stands today. When he was older, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, a much older woman, and they had three children, Susanna, Judith, and Hamnet. Unfortunately, Hamnet died when he was only eleven years old.

One day, Shakespeare moved to London, England, and began to write plays. His family remained in Stratford-Upon-Avon. In London, Shakespeare acted in several plays, and eventually began writing plays of his own. He wrote four basic kinds of plays: tragedies, comedies, histories, and, what have been called by various names, romances or problem plays.

Shakespeare's tragedies are plays in which the hero, or main character, comes to a tragic end because of something he or she does, or because of the events around them. *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Romeo and Juliet* are three of his famous tragedies. Shakespeare's comedies are plays involving humorous situations and mistaken identities, which usually end well for all involved, sometimes in a wedding. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of his famous comedies. The history plays are based on great figures from history, such as kings and knights. *Richard II* and *Richard III* are famous plays about English kings from the past. The problem plays, or romances, are often adventurous stories involving difficult problems.

In Shakespeare's time, actors wore interesting costumes, a few wore masks, and they used some props, like guns or swords. If you were an actor working with Shakespeare, you might have to be a king, a soldier, a witch, a fairy, or a ghost. Only men and boys could be in the plays, because people in Shakespeare's day thought it was rude for a woman or a girl to be in a play. Since girls were not allowed, boys got to play the parts of the ladies!

One of the theaters Shakespeare worked in was called The Globe. It could hold 3 000 people, and was a theater without a roof! Rich people sat on benches in a covered area, but most people stood on the floor and watched the plays. The people who stood were called groundlings, and if it rained, they got wet! When they didn't like a play, they often threw things at the actors.

Shakespeare returned to Stratford-Upon-Avon when he was much older, after a fire burned The Globe Theatre to the ground. He died when he was 52, on his birthday, April 23, in 1616. When he died, many people mourned him.

We remember him today because he wrote plays that continue to mean a lot to us. Plays like *Richard III*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are still performed everywhere, because people like to hear the ideas and words that Shakespeare wrote, and because he told stories about the feelings that people have always had.

A Guide to Shakespearean Vocabulary

Shakespeare is often difficult for people today to understand because of the language used in his day. Below you will find examples of some of the common "old-fashioned" words and phrases used by Shakespeare, with modern explanations. Once you understand them, Shakespeare's plays will be even more enjoyable to you.

Word	Meaning	Example	Meaning
thou	you	Thou shalt be king.	You shall be king.
thee	you	I give this to thee.	I give this to you.
thy	your	I see thy glory.	I see your glory.
hast	have	...try all thy friends thou hast in Ephesus.	...try all your friends you have in Ephesus.
hath	has	His majesty hath appointed this ...	His majesty has appointed this...
art	are	O, Bottom, thou art changed!	Oh, Bottom, you are changed!
wilt	will	Wilt thou be gone?	Will you go?
dost	do	What dost thou know?	What do you know?
shalt	shall	Thou shalt be king.	You shall be king.
'tis	it is	'Tis he, that villain Romeo.	It is he, that villain Romeo.
whence	where	Whence is that knocking?	Where is that knocking coming from?
hence	from here	Help me hence!	Help me from here!
whither	where	Whither have they vanished?	Where have they vanished to?

Shakespeare also uses some old-fashioned verb forms not listed above. Since Shakespeare often wrote in a form of verse that had to have a certain number of beats in each line to maintain its rhythm, he often used what we would call contractions to make the words fit. For example, you might see the words **speakest** (pronounced *speak-ist*), which means "speak", and **speak'st** (pronounced as *speakst*) in a different place. They both mean the same thing. Another example is the use of past tense verbs ending in -ed. In order to fit into the beats per line of his verse, Shakespeare often replaces the "e" with an apostrophe. You might see the words **punished** and **punish'd** in the same play, and while they have the same meaning, they are pronounced very differently. **Punished** is pronounced *pun-ish-ed*, a three-syllable word, while **punish'd** is pronounced the same way as we would pronounce the word *punished*. In this collection of plays, do not pronounce the -ed ending as a separate syllable unless specifically told to do so.

Richard II

Performance Length	Number of Parts	Genre
10 to 15 Minutes	13	History

Synopsis



Long ago, in England, the young king, Richard II, was proving to be unpopular for his arrogant decisions and pursuits. The final straw for many of the nobles occurred when Richard seized the inheritance of Henry Bolingbroke, his cousin who he had earlier banished, to finance an armed assault on some rebel Irish. Upon returning to England, Richard found his reign opposed almost universally, and several of his supporters already executed. Surrendering his crown to Bolingbroke, Richard was sent to the Tower of London, where he was assassinated by a supporter of Bolingbroke, now King Henry IV. Saddened by the news of Richard's death, Henry promised to go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land to atone for his role in Richard's demise.

Characters



Reading Levels of Difficulty:

Easy (E) Moderate (M) Challenging (C)

King Richard II (C)

John of Gaunt (C)

Aumerle (M)

Bushy (E)

Earl of Salisbury (E)

Northumberland (E)

Narrator (M)

Henry Bolingbroke, Duke of Hereford (C)

Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk (C)

Green (E)

Duke of York (C)

Sir Stephen Scroop (E)

Sir Pierce of Exton (M)

Pronunciation Guide

Aumerle (ah-murl or oh-murl)

Staging & Costumes (Reading-Only Performance)

In a reading-only performance, costumes are an option that some classes like to choose, and are most effective when kept simple. Girls can wear long dresses, and boys can wear a man's white or light-colored shirt, not tucked in, and secured at the waist by a belt. King Richard should be dressed in a long robe, wearing a crown. King Richard should be portrayed as a sympathetic character after he abdicates, and those around Bolingbroke as very eager to have achieved power. Have the student playing Richard try to appear calm yet regal in the face of his changed position, and the student playing Bolingbroke to appear ashamed by his supporters' actions. Have the students sit in a semi-circle, facing their audience.

Teaching Tips

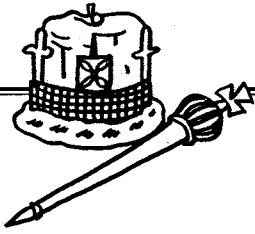
- **Introducing the Play:**
Discuss the kings of England, throughout the Middle Ages. Talk about the fact that, quite often, it was the person who had the strongest army, and not necessarily the inherited right to the throne, who became king. How might this make those with the birthright to the throne react?
- **Pre-Reading Language Activity:**
What are the elements of historical fiction? What is fact and what is fiction? Make a chart and record the students' thoughts.
- **Discuss:**
Does Bolingbroke have a right to the throne? Was he right to act as he did?
How did King Richard's actions lead to his downfall? What was his biggest mistake?

Extension Activities

- Pretend you are a reporter on the scene when King Richard gives up his crown. What would your news story contain? How would you tell the story? Write your news article.
- Write an editorial on the following topic: Should Henry Bolingbroke be king?



Richard II



Dramatis Personae

- King Richard II – _____
- Henry Bolingbroke, Duke of Hereford – _____
- John of Gaunt – _____
- Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk – _____
- Aumerle – _____
- Green – _____
- Bushy – _____
- Duke of York – _____
- Earl of Salisbury – _____
- Sir Stephen Scroop – _____
- Northumberland – _____
- Sir Pierce of Exton – _____
- Narrator – _____

Long ago, in England, the young king, Richard II, often ruled in an arrogant way. Unlike his father, King Edward, Richard did not always take the advice of wiser men around him, and so he often made decisions that would come back to haunt him.

- King Richard:** Old John of Gaunt, call them to our presence, Bolingbroke and Norfolk, and face to face, frowning brow to frowning brow, we will hear them.
- John of Gaunt:** Bring them in.
- Bolingbroke:** Many happy days befall my gracious sovereign.
- Norfolk:** Each day still better other's happiness.
- King Richard:** We thank you both. Cousin Bolingbroke, what dost thou object against the Duke of Norfolk, Thomas Mowbray?
- Bolingbroke:** Free from misbegotten hate, come I before your princely presence. Thomas Mowbray is a traitor. He took your money and did wrongly use it, and plotted the Duke of Gloucester's death.
- King Richard:** How high a pitch his resolution soars! Thomas Mowbray, what say'st thou to this?

