

SHAKESPEARE FOR GROWN-UPS

EVERYTHING YOU NEED
TO KNOW ABOUT
THE BARD



E. FOLEY AND B. COATES



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About the Book

Do you find yourself dozing off during *A Winter's Tale*?

Are you guilty of uttering the phrase 'hoist with his own petard' without really knowing what a 'petard' is?

Can you complete the line: 'O Romeo, Romeo...'?

Feeling a bit shaky when it comes to your knowledge of Shakespeare?

Flounder no more.

Shakespeare for Grown-Ups is the essential guide for anyone keen to brush up on their knowledge of the Bard.

About the Authors

Doing their best to forget their underwhelming turns as Peaseblossom and the Bishop of Carlisle in school performances, B. Coates and E. Foley were delighted to rediscover the joy of Shakespeare as grown-ups.

As editors, they spend their days immersed in 'Words, words, words'. They are the bestselling authors of *Homework for Grown-ups*, *Advanced Homework for Grown-ups* and *The Homework for Grown-ups Quiz Book*.

Also by E. Foley and B. Coates

Homework for Grown-ups
Advanced Homework for Grown-ups
Homework for Grown-ups Quiz Book

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For Lola, Barnabas,
Iris and Joseph

Shakespeare for Grown-ups

Everything you Need to Know about the
Bard

E. Foley & B. Coates

▣ SQUARE PEG



INTRODUCTION

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE IS without question Britain's greatest literary hero. His work has spoken to countless generations, nationalities and cultures, and to men, women and children alike. His plays have been translated into every language under the sun and performances of them can be seen from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe. But how much do you really know about the man and his wondrous words?

For many of us, our first experience of Shakespeare can be intimidating and (whisper it) a little wearisome. And if you have a bad start with the Bard, chances are that will affect your grown-up encounters with him too. Do you find yourself dozing off during *The Winter's Tale*? Does all that thumb-biting in *Romeo and Juliet* perplex you? Find it hard to stomach the jokes in *The Taming of the Shrew*? Lost by the language of the famous monologues from *King Lear* and *Othello*? Worry not, you aren't alone. And although today every schoolchild will encounter Shakespeare's work at some point in their English lessons, the majority of UK adults will only be properly familiar with one or two plays at most. In fact, a recent poll showed that 5 per cent of 18- to 34-year-olds think Shakespeare's most famous play is *Cinderella*, and 2 per cent from the same group think the man himself is a fictional character. That's why this book is essential reading for anyone who feels they should know more about our greatest poet, or, indeed, anyone looking to

revive their acquaintance with him, or even just help their children with their homework.

As well as taking an in-depth look at the most-loved, -studied and -performed plays, we will take you on a journey through the different genres Shakespeare made his own – the Comedies, Histories and Tragedies – and we'll show you how to decode his enigmatic sonnets. We'll also show you that there is much to be treasured and enjoyed in his less familiar works.

We don't claim to be Shakespeare scholars; we are ordinary readers who were curious to learn more about our greatest national poet, and we became passionate about passing on the most interesting facts we discovered. The aim of this book is to give a solid understanding of Shakespeare's genius and to arm you with the tools you need to enjoy him with confidence and insight. In addition, we'll peruse some of the more perplexing problems that have agitated academics over the years: Did Shakespeare really write his plays himself? What exactly is the First Folio? What would it have been like to see one of his plays at the time of its first performance? What does 'hoist with his own petard' actually mean? Who might the sonnets' Dark Lady be?

Between these covers you will find nuggets on a broad range of topics including the historical context of Shakespeare's writing; his personal life, contemporaries and influences; his language and poetic skill; the key themes of his oeuvre; his less well-known works and characters; his most famous speeches and quotations; the phrases and words that he invented, and much more.

The world is a far richer place thanks to this glove-maker's son from Stratford and his unparalleled influence over our imaginations and language. His 'eternal summer shall not fade . . . So long as men can breathe or eyes can see' and we hope that by the time you finish this book you are as

filled with admiration and enthusiasm for his work as we are.

‘Brevity Is The Soul Of Wit’
All Shakespeare’s Plays In One Sentence Each

Obviously a close reading of the plays will richly reward any student of Shakespeare, but we understand if you need a quick cheat’s guide. We’ve set out each one in a sentence so you can always be ready to impress with extensive knowledge of the whole back catalogue of Will’s works.

COMEDIES

The Tempest

The magician Prospero shipwrecks the enemies that originally ousted him from Italy, but when Ferdinand, the son of his arch-rival Alonso, falls for his daughter Miranda he finally faces them down and learns to forgive.

The Two Gentlemen of Verona

Proteus, who loves Julia, is friends with Valentine, who loves Silvia, but their friendship deteriorates when Proteus gets Valentine outlawed in order to pursue Silvia himself, much to the dismay of his page Sebastian who is actually Julia in disguise, until, after much trouble, everyone ends up with their original beloved.

The Merry Wives of Windsor

Falstaff’s cynical seduction of two wealthy women goes awry when they find out about each other and decide to return the compliment by making him a laughing stock.

Measure for Measure

In the Duke of Vienna's absence, his frosty deputy Angelo resurrects arcane fornication laws but is busted trying to blackmail a nun into sex by the Duke in disguise as a friar.

The Comedy of Errors

Separated in a shipwreck as babies, friends Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse head to Ephesus to search for their twin brothers, the helpfully named Antipholus and Dromio of Ephesus, leading to much confusion for wives and friends until their parents appear and sort everything out.

Much Ado About Nothing

In Sicily, Claudio and Hero are cruelly tricked and parted while Benedick and Beatrice fight and fall in love before deceptions and disguises are uncovered by a hapless nightwatchman and harmonious order is restored with marriages and jiggling.

Love's Labour's Lost

The King of Navarre and three friends inconveniently swear off women for three years just before a beautiful princess and her ladies arrive for a visit, inspiring all of them to break their oaths after many love-letter mix-ups and other shenanigans.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Mistaken administering of love juice results in Titania, Queen of the Fairies, falling for the ass Bottom, while two sets of couples get confused in the woods, before the natural order of things is restored.

The Merchant of Venice

Antonio makes a risky deal: putting up a pound of flesh as collateral against a loan to fund his friend Bassanio's pursuit of Portia, and when the moneylender Shylock calls in his debt, Portia, dressed as a man, successfully fights Antonio's case in a court of law with an ingenious defence.

As You Like It

The exile of brothers, dukes, fathers, daughters, cousins and clowns to the benign bubble of the Forest of Arden leads to disguise, gender-bending and, finally, happy marriages for all.

The Taming of the Shrew

Stroppy Katherina stands in the way of her more pliable sister Bianca's marriage, so Bianca's suitors persuade fortune-hunter Petruchio to marry her and embark on a campaign of mental cruelty that 'tames' her and leaves everyone content and happily married.

All's Well that Ends Well

Orphan Helena is determined to have her man Bertram - even if he doesn't want her - and tricks him into impregnating her by pretending to be Diana (who he does fancy), a tactic that makes him appreciate Helena and vow to be a good husband to her.

Twelfth Night, or What You Will

Twins Viola and Sebastian lose each other after a shipwreck and, believing each other to be dead, become the servants of amorous Illyrian nobles, but after much disguise-inspired confusion and a yellow-stockings-themed subplot, they are finally reunited.

The Winter's Tale

King Leontes' jealous madness leads to the demise of his children, and the death-by-grief of his wife, but happily many years later it is revealed that his wife and daughter are actually both alive and all are reconciled.

Pericles

Pericles competes for a wife and then loses her and his newborn daughter in a shipwreck before, many years later, reuniting with them after his wife has become a priestess and his daughter, Marina, a virginal prostitute.

The Two Noble Kinsmen

Friends Palamon and Arcite fall out over their love for Emilia but an unbiddable horse means Palamon eventually gets the girl.

HISTORIES

King John

King John is threatened by an angry nephew, the King of France and a cardinal, and is finally murdered by a malcontent monk.

Richard II

Proud, long-serving King Richard is finally undone by ambitious Henry Bolingbroke, his own vanity and a penchant for land-grabbing.

Henry IV, Part 1

Henry Bolingbroke is now King Henry, but his complete enjoyment of his reign is undermined by worries about his

wayward son Hal and his associations with the drunkard Falstaff, and the rebellion of Henry Percy, gloriously nicknamed Hotspur, who's eventually killed by Hal.

Henry IV, Part 2

Hotspur's father avenges his son's death by threatening to cause civil war, news that makes Henry's health decline, until on his deathbed he makes up with his errant son Hal who rejects his pal Falstaff and prepares to accept the crown as a more sensibly named Henry V.

Henry V

Henry decides to start his reign with a rather punchy request to rule France, which is rejected, but after glorious victory at Agincourt, Princess Katherine of France marries him and the countries are bound together.

Henry VI, Part 1

Young Henry struggles to live up to his heroic father despite dealing successfully with Joan of Arc (although less successfully with his own dastardly dukes).

Henry VI, Part 2

Henry fails to control his nobles: cue War of the Roses.

Henry VI, Part 3

Henry loses his throne, regains it, soliloquises on a molehill, loses the throne again and is stabbed to death by the future Richard III.

Richard III

Hunchback ubervillain has his brother drowned in barrel of wine, his nephews (the 'Princes in the Tower') murdered, poisons his wife, is surprised when people start to turn against him, and then gets killed in battle by the future King Henry VII after inconveniently losing his horse.

Henry VIII

Henry meets and falls in love with the beautiful Anne Bullen at one of Cardinal Wolsey's parties, ousting his current wife, crowning Anne as Queen and allowing Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, to predict great things at the birth of their daughter Elizabeth.

TRAGEDIES

Troilus and Cressida

Troilus (Paris and Hector's brother) falls in love with Cressida (the daughter of a Trojan priest) and after a single night of passion loses her to the Greeks waiting outside the city's walls - cue much teeth-gnashing and revenge.

Coriolanus

Martial hero Coriolanus saves Rome from Volscian invasion, is persuaded to run for consul by his manipulative mother, banished when the people turn on him, dissuaded from enacting revenge on his former home by his family, and finally murdered by those vexing Volscians.

Titus Andronicus

Roman general Titus is infuriated when his arch-enemy and former captive, Tamora, Queen of the Goths, marries the emperor: murder, rape, mutilation, cannibalism and infanticide leave pretty much everyone dead.

Romeo and Juliet

Unsupportive relatives ruin young lovers' bliss, leading to a fatal fake suicide mix-up.

Timon of Athens

Generous playboy Timon gets into debt and leaves Athens to make his home in a cave, whereupon he discovers mounds of gold, and dies after realising his only true friend is his servant Flavius.

Julius Caesar

Worthy Roman Brutus, concerned about his dictator friend's political intentions, gets caught up in a conspiracy that ends with him stabbing a disappointed Caesar before being driven to suicide by his rival Mark Antony's superior oratory and tactics.

Macbeth

The Thane Macbeth receives a prophecy from three 'weyrd sisters' that he'll be King of Scotland, and his murderously ambitious wife helps him to achieve his dream, but at the very worst price.

Hamlet

Listless student prince Hamlet, traumatised by his villainous uncle Claudius' fratricide, is inspired by the ghost of his father to feign insanity, sending his girlfriend Ophelia loopy and resulting in a catastrophic poison-and-fencing bloodbath.

King Lear

Old King Lear makes a terrible mistake in trusting his bad daughters and exiling his truest child, Cordelia, before going mad on a stormy heath and dying with Cordelia's expired body in his arms.

Othello

Moorish Venetian general Othello skips off to Cyprus with his beloved wife Desdemona and apparent best friend Iago, who makes it his mission to destroy their lives using only a handkerchief and a lot of insinuation.

Antony and Cleopatra

Mark Antony, one of Rome's three leaders, neglects his duties in favour of a passionate affair with Egyptian Queen Cleopatra, incurring Caesar's wrath and resulting in their bloody double suicide, by sword and, more inventively, by asp bite.

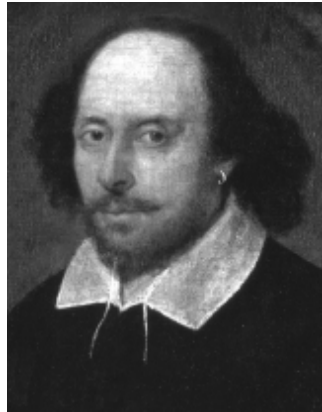
Cymbeline

British King Cymbeline, encouraged by his evil Queen, banishes his daughter Imogen's secret husband Posthumus, and annoys the Romans, but thankfully Imogen resists various ensuing attempts on her life and it all gets sorted out in the end.



THE LIFE AND TIMES OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

'The web of our life is of a mingled yarn'
What we know about Shakespeare's life



TANTALISINGLY, WE KNOW very little about William Shakespeare's life. His thoughts on love, marriage, politics, children, death, sin, temptation and sexuality were never recorded, apart from in his works of course, which are open to endless interpretation. Despite the best efforts of archivists and scholars, Will remains an enigma, a blank canvas on which countless biographers have painted their own vivid and often fanciful pictures. Despite how familiar you may feel you are with the Bard's visage, there are only a handful of portraits of him in existence and historians still squabble over which are most likely to be accurate. The one above is the Chandos portrait from the National Gallery in London, attributed to painter John Taylor, which was said to have been originally in the possession of writer William Davenant, Shakespeare's godson (and, as rumour had it, according to John Aubrey's *Brief Lives*, his illegitimate son).

So what *do* we know about Shakespeare? There is a record of his baptism at Holy Trinity Church in the market town of Stratford-upon-Avon on 26 April 1564, and, given that in Elizabethan times children were typically baptised between

two and four days after their birth, many people hedge their bets and take our national poet's birthday to be 23 April, which is also, rather conveniently, St George's Day. His father, John Shakespeare, was a glove-maker (and, pleasingly, a municipal ale-taster), and his mother, Mary Arden, was the daughter of a well-known and respected landowner. Shakespeare was probably educated at the King's New Grammar School, where he would have been coached extensively in the rigours of Latin and rhetoric: you can see him flexing those classical muscles in the plays where certain characters use magnificent rhetoric and persuasion to manipulate the action - think of Iago in *Othello*, Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* and Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*. Older boys spoke Latin in class, and they would have had a good knowledge of classical texts and mythology.

We don't know what Shakespeare did after school - this is the first example of his 'lost years', where Shakespeare simply disappears from the record books - but it's likely that his father's financial difficulties (of which there *is* a record) prevented him from going to university, and Will probably spent his teenage years as an apprentice in his father's glove-making business. It's easy to speculate how frustrating this might have been for a young man with such an intense literary gift, but then again maybe he loved it. Many critics fall into the trap of assuming it's possible to guess Shakespeare's thoughts and opinions from our idea of what *we* would like the author of such brilliant plays and poems to be like. Some seventeenth-century accounts of the 'lost years' have it that he was forced to do a runner from home after being caught poaching deer from Sir Thomas Lucy's nearby estate at Charlecote. Again, there's an appeal to the idea of Shakespeare as a kind of proto-Danny the Champion of the World, but there's evidence that the deer park was only instated at Charlecote in the seventeenth century, so the sums don't quite add up.

Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway in 1582 when she was twenty-six and he was eighteen. The age gap was unusual, but even more unusual was Shakespeare's youth when he got hitched. The age of consent was twenty-one, so his father would have had to agree to the match. Perhaps this is explained by the fact that Anne was three months pregnant when they tied the knot; their first daughter Susanna was born in 1583, followed by twins Judith and Hamnet eighteen months later in 1585. Their marriage has been the subject of huge speculation - did Anne ever accompany her famous husband to London and witness the literary life he led there? Was theirs a union of mutual adoration, or one dogged by ill-temper and drudgery? It was certainly a long marriage, but we have no way of knowing if it was a happy one - even Shakespeare's last will and testament fails to set the record straight in any convincing way ([see here](#)).



The coat of arms purchased by Shakespeare

After the record of his twins' birth there is another long 'lost' period, lasting right up to 1592, all the more frustrating because it's during this time that he left Stratford for London, and made the transition to successful actor, playwright and part-owner of a theatre. Many theories abound: taking as evidence a preoccupation with the ocean and storms in his

plays (think *The Tempest*, *Othello*, *Twelfth Night*, etc.), some wonder if he went to sea, possibly spending time in Italy. Or perhaps he went north, working as a tutor for a Catholic family, before meeting the Lord Derby's Men – a company of actors – and travelling south with them to the bright lights (or at least flaming torches) of London. Or did he become a player in the Queen's Men – another acting company – and begin to ply his trade with them? We'll never know for sure, but the next concrete placing of Shakespeare is a bit of a battering in print, in Robert Greene's *Groatsworth of Wit, Bought with a Million of Repentance* (1592) ([see here](#)).

By the end of the 1590s, Shakespeare was a wealthy man, probably one of the first British writers to accumulate a stash of cash from the proceeds of his literary endeavours by taking shares in the theatre which performed his plays (records show he made a bit on the side from some illegal malt-hoarding and tax evasion too – he appears to have been a canny businessman). He broke the mould by securing for himself a percentage of box-office takings and was able to buy a flashy house, New Place in Stratford, and his status was so elevated that he was permitted to purchase a coat of arms bearing the motto 'Non sanz droict', or 'Not without right'.

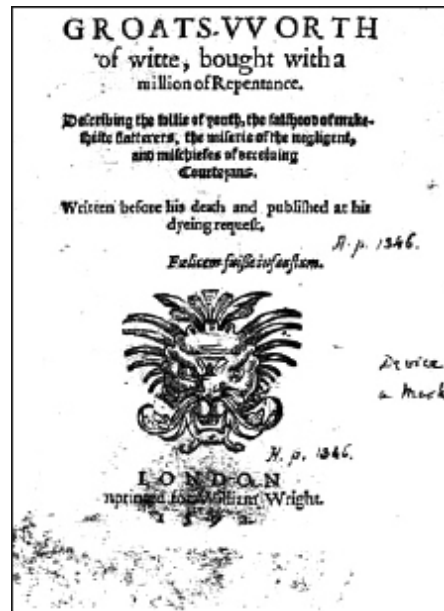
In the late summer of 1596 Shakespeare's son Hamnet died at the age of eleven, from unknown causes. His daughters Susanna and Judith went on to marry and have children: Judith had three, but they all died young, and Susanna's daughter Elizabeth died childless, ending the line.

By 1613, Shakespeare was spending more and more time in Stratford, and had stopped writing plays – again the reason why he ceased writing remains a mystery. The fact that he signed his will in March 1616 probably means that his health was failing. The following month, close to his birthday, he died and was buried in the Holy Trinity Church. His will offers up another enigma: Anne Hathaway, his wife of thirty-four years, is mentioned in just twelve devastatingly brief

words, 'I gyve unto my wief my second best bed with the furniture.' Much has been made of this apparent slight, and of course in modern times we might feel a touch aggrieved to be honoured after all those years of wedlock with a dodgy bed. But in fact it's all about context. One theory is that the best bed would probably have been reserved for guests, and would have been considered an heirloom - i.e. an item reserved for heirs, not wives. Clearly the wondrous wordsmith didn't see his last will and testament as the place for anything more enlightening or flowery about his marriage. The inscription on his grave is a dream for conspiracy theorists - like an English Tutankhamun it offers up a curse on whoever disturbs his remains, prompting some to speculate there may be a hidden manuscript buried with the Bard.

Robert Greene's 'upstart crow'

Robert Greene was a playwright who was about four years older than Shakespeare, and an established member of London's literary scene when Shakespeare arrived on it. He was part of a group known as the University Wits along with other well-educated writers like Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Lodge, George Peele and Thomas Nashe. A heavy drinker and gambler, womaniser and liar, he was also in possession of a monster ego. A fun chap to be around then, and certainly one with a chip on his shoulder about young William's accelerating success in his milieu.



It's not entirely clear why Shakespeare bothered Greene so much, but probably his audacity in believing he could move from being a provincial, lower-class actor to competing with the establishment playwrights rankled with this snooty, and less significant, writer. Shakespeare had not gone to Oxford or Cambridge University, as most of his contemporary playwrights had, and even though he was writing his way into the history books as one of the most brilliant minds this country has ever produced, he was still just a man from the provinces. It also appears that Shakespeare did not throw himself into the gentleman poets' scene with the gusto they might have wanted; he wasn't a big drinker – according to John Aubrey's *Lives*, he was a man who 'wouldn't be debauched' – and he had his head screwed on when it came to finances. Greene, on the other hand, died penniless and bitter at the age of thirty-two in September 1592 (with Marlowe pursuing him towards his Maker the following year), leaving behind enough unpublished work for a printer named Henry Chettle to produce a posthumous pamphlet entitled *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit, Bought with a Million of Repentance* – essentially a moralistic fable which is revealed at the end to be autobiographical.

The passage we're interested in begins with a warning to the other members of his gang not to trust actors who mangle poets' words. And he goes on: 'Yes trust them not: for there is an Upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tyger's hart wrapt in a Player's hyde supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you: and being an absolute *Johannes Factotum* [jack of all trades], is in his owne conceit the only Shake-scene in the country.' That lovely 'tiger's heart' metaphor is a direct lift from the first act of *Henry VI, Part 3*. As Stephen Greenblatt points out in his excellent biography *Will in the World*, Shakespeare got his revenge, with an effusive apology from publisher Henry Chettle: 'I am as sorry as if the original fault had been my fault,

because myself have seen his demeanour no less civil than he excellent in the quality he professes', and a nice dig through Polonius in *Hamlet*: 'that's an ill phrase, a vile phrase, "beautified" is a vile phrase'.

Good frend for Jesus sake forbear
To digg the dust enclosed heare.
Blese be the man that spares thes stones,
And curst be he that moves my bones.

This, and the other gaps in his biography, opens the door for fans to look for clues in his work. Feel free to enjoy yourself conjecturing. But try not to be disappointed that we don't know more facts about Shakespeare the man; sometimes it's best not to get to know your heroes - it keeps the magic alive.

Why is Shakespeare called the Bard?

'Bard' is an ancient Gaelic term meaning poet. It initially referred to a minstrel who might travel from village to village reciting legends of chieftains and their triumphs. Shakespeare has been given the epithet because he is *the* definitive poet, and recognised not just in Britain but across the world as such (though Scots might disagree - Robert Burns is known as the Bard in Caledonia). It's assumed that he was first called the Bard by David Garrick ([see here](#)) during the celebratory Shakespeare Jubilee held in Stratford in 1769 in his snappily titled 'An Ode upon dedicating a building, and erecting a statue, to Shakespeare, at Stratford upon Avon' which read:

Sweetest bard that ever sung,
Nature's glory, Fancy's child;
Never sure did witching tongue,
Warble forth such wood-notes wild!

What was life like in Shakespeare's day?