**Overview of Shakespeare’s Plays**

Exact dating of every play is not possible, but a variety of evidence permits us to group the plays within four periods. In each period, the plays are listed in the order some scholars say they were written in.

Elizabethan Plays, 1592-1598

*The Comedy of Errors*, comedy, adapted from Plautus (farcical) – the best classical comedy in English

*1 Henry VI*, history

*2 Henry VI,* history

*3 Henry VI*, history

*Richard III*, history

This first tetralogy features huge casts of characters representing various social classes, political factions, and points of view. 1 Henry VI is distinguished by a nasty portrayal of Joan of Arc and by the famous (not historical) scene in which the nobles pluck red or white roses in the Temple Garden. 2 Henry VI includes Jack Cade’s historical rebellion and many less factual episodes. 3 Henry VI is almost all battle and bloodshed. *Richard III* is a dramatization of Thomas More’s unfinished biography of that monarch, which bears fairly little resemblance to actual history.

*The Taming of the Shrew*, comedy (farcical); it can be read as less sexist than its reputation is

*Titus Andronicus*, tragedy, resembling Seneca, written in collaboration with George Peele

*Two Gentlemen of Verona*, comedy (romantic)

*King John*, history; more precisely, historical fiction

*Love’s Labor’s Lost*, comedy (romantic)

*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, comedy (romantic)

*Richard II*, history

*Romeo and Juliet,* tragedy

These three plays are Shakespeare’s first masterpieces in each of the three Elizabethan genres. They are also the most poetic plays he ever wrote; the dialogue is more often verse than prose.

*The Merchant of Venice*, comedy (romantic); less anti-Semitic than any preceding play about a Jew

*1 Henry IV*, history

*2 Henry IV*, history

Elizabethan Plays, 1599-1603 (The Globe Theatre was built in 1599, and Queen Elizabeth died in 1603.)

*As You Like It*, comedy (romantic); the first of what many consider the two nearly perfect comedies

*Henry V*, history

The second historical tetralogy, set before the first, includes *Richard II*, Parts 1 and 2 of *Henry IV*, and *Henry V.* Despite their titles, the second, third, and fourth plays are focused on Prince Hal, who becomes king during the third play. The second and third plays are also focused on Hal’s chosen mentor, Falstaff, a knight, a thief, a coward, a drunkard, a lecher, and one of the funniest and/or most pathetic characters ever created – he evokes opposing reactions in every reader.

*Julius Caesar*, tragedy, based on Plutarch

*Much Ado about Nothing*, comedy (romantic); the subplot is justifiably more popular than the main plot

*Twelfth Night*, comedy (romantic); the second comedy many consider nearly perfect

*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, comedy (farcical)

*Hamlet*, tragedy, one of the four best tragedies Shakespeare wrote

*Troilus and Cressida*, a tragedy or tragicomedy or problem play, cynical or satirical about love and war

Jacobean Plays, 1604-1608 (Jacobean is the adjectival form of James, king of England 1603-1625)

*All’s Well that Ends Well*

*Measure for Measure*

These are called tragicomedies, dark comedies, or problem plays. They begin tragically, and their happy endings are problematic to many readers. They are cynical about lust and about the possibility of love, at least in the male characters.

*Othello*, tragedy, one of the four best

*King Lear*, tragedy, one of the four best

*Macbeth*, tragedy, one of the four best

*Timon of Athens*, tragedy, written in collaboration with Thomas Middleton

*Pericles*, dramatic romance (see below for discussion of genre)

*Antony and Cleopatra*, tragedy, based on Plutarch; its plot is set just after that of *Julius Caesar*

*Coriolanus,* tragedy, based on Plutarch

There are reasons why “Elizabethan comedy” and “Jacobean tragedy” are familiar phrases. Shakespeare plays that are Jacobean and comedic either darken towards tragedy or move from realism to romance.

Jacobean Plays, 1609-1613 (Shakespeare’s company acquired a private indoor theatre in 1609.)

*Cymbeline*

*A Winter’s Tale*

*The Tempest*

Shakespeare’s last four happy-ending plays (starting with *Pericles*) are sometimes called autumnal or late comedies but are more often classified as a different genre, dramatic romance. The definition of romance used here is based on the medieval and Early Modern tradition of narrative romance, stories with not only love but also adventures and marvels. All four plays were completed by 1611; Shakespeare probably left London for Stratford by 1612.

*Henry VIII*, history, written in collaboration with John Fletcher, first performed in June 1613; modern

readers may be put off by the play’s anti-Catholicism and its extravagant praise of Henry VIII, but it has some wonderful scenes and great speeches – the latter undoubtedly Shakespeare’s.

*Two Noble Kinsmen*, tragicomedy, written in collaboration with John Fletcher, based on Chaucer’s

Knight’s Tale in *The Canterbury Tales.*

Publications

Shakespeare died in 1616 in Stratford. Members of his company collected 36 of these 38 plays and published them in 1623 in a large-format edition now known as the First Folio. Half of the 36 plays had been previously published in small-format editions called quartos; the other half appeared here first. The two plays we now attribute to Shakespeare that are not here are *Pericles* and *Two Noble Kinsmen.*