

William Shakespeare's theatrical production

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon probably on 23 April 1564. After attending the local grammar school, at 18 he married Anne Hathaway and they had three children, one of whom died in childhood.

Around 1584, Shakespeare left Stratford, probably to avoid being imprisoned for poaching.¹ Little is known about his early years in London and the beginning of his career, but by 1594 Shakespeare had become a successful playwright and a leading member of the theatre company Chamberlain's Men, renamed King's Men under King James I. He worked with the company for the rest of his career as a writer, actor and administrator. Their first performance was held in the company's theatre, the Globe, and later plays were performed in the covered Blackfriars theatre.

In 1610 Shakespeare went back to his hometown, where he died on 23 April 1616. His 37 plays achieved enormous success and are still performed in theatres all over the world.

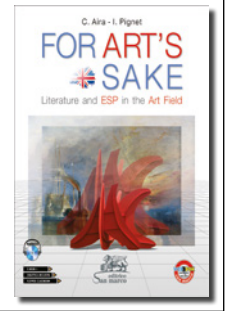
Shakespeare used different sources for his plays. For historical dramas, he took inspiration from Holinshed's Chronicles (1577), the first vernacular² account of British history from the Plantagenet kings (1154) to the War of the Two Roses (1455-1485). For the Roman plays, he used the translation of Plutarch's Lives by Sir Thomas North (1579). The plots of his comedies are based on novels by the Italian writers Bandello, Cinzio and Fiorentino.

During his lifetime, only half his plays appeared in print. Seven years after Shakespeare's death, two of his friends published a collection of his works, with no mention of the date of composition. For this reason, it is difficult to establish a clear chronology. However, the majority of critics agree in identifying four main periods.

GLOSSARY

- 1 killing animals on the king's lands without permission
- 2 colloquial language

| | Comedies | Historical dramas | Tragedies and Roman plays |
|--|---|---|---|
| First phase (1589-1595): Experimental plays | The Comedy of Errors (influenced by Plautus) The Taming of the Shrew (influenced by Ariosto) The Two Gentlemen of Verona Love's Labour's Lost A Midsummer Night's Dream | Henry VI Richard III (both influenced by Marlowe) Richard II | Titus Andronicus (influenced by Seneca) Romeo and Juliet |



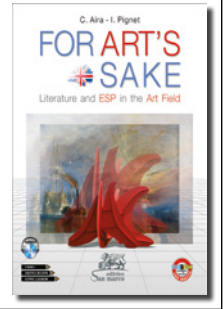
| | Comedies | Historical dramas | Tragedies and Roman plays |
|--|---|---------------------|---|
| Second phase (1596-1602): Historical plays and comedies | The Merchant of Venice Twelfth Night | Henry IV Henry V | Julius Caesar |
| Third phase (1600-1608): Great tragedies | Troilus and Cressida All's Well that Ends Well Measure for Measure | | Hamlet Othello King Lear Macbeth Anthony and Cleopatra Coriolanus (based on the model of Roman tragedies) |
| Fourth phase (1608-1613): Romantic tragi- comedies | Pericles Cymbeline The Winter's Tale The Tempest | Henry VIII | |

Hamlet

Hamlet is the son of the recently deceased king of Denmark, and of **Gertrude**, who, after the king's death, married **Claudius**, the king's brother. One night the king's ghost visits Hamlet and reveals to him that he was murdered by Claudius. Hamlet decides to take **revenge**. He begins by pretending to be mad and rejects the love of **Ophelia**, the daughter of **Polonius**, the King's Counsellor. Then, in order to discover the truth, he organizes a play about a fratricide. During the murder scene, Claudius escapes from the room, giving Hamlet proof of his guilt. By mistake, Hamlet kills Polonius.

Realizing that Hamlet suspects him, Claudius resolves to send him to England to have him executed. Hamlet manages to escape, and returns to Denmark just in time for Ophelia's burial. After Hamlet killed Polonius and confused by Hamlet's inconstant behaviour, Ophelia turned mad and committed suicide. Her brother, **Laertes**, decides to avenge his father and sister's deaths. In the course of the duel, both Laertes and Hamlet die, Gertrude drinks a poisoned cup and Claudius is mortally wounded by Hamlet.

Hamlet is a revenge tragedy, but its main focus is the main **character's indecisiveness** and **failure to act**. Hamlet is **obsessed by death** and spends much of the play reflecting on it: he feels miserable and often longs for death, but in



the meantime he fears it and its consequences.

The **monologue** that follows is an example of his reasoning. Claudius wants to discover why Hamlet is behaving so strangely. He and Polonius hide, while Hamlet enters the hall of the castle and contemplates his feelings about life and death.

To Be or not to Be

From *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, act III, scene 1

HAMLET To be, or not to be, that is the question:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings¹ and arrows of outrageous fortune

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles

And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep –

No more; and by a sleep to say we end

The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks

That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation²

Devoutly³ to be wished. To die, to sleep –

To sleep, perchance⁴ to dream: ay,⁵ there's the rub,⁶

For in that sleep of death what dreams may come

When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,⁷

Must give us pause.⁸ There's the respect⁹

That makes calamity of so long life.

For who would bear the whips and scorns¹⁰ of time,

Th' oppressor's wrong,¹¹ the proud man's contumely¹²

The pangs¹³ of despised¹⁴ love, the law's delay,

The insolence of office,¹⁵ and the spurns¹⁶

That patient merit of¹⁷ th' unworthy takes,

When he himself might his quietus¹⁸ make

With a bare bodkin?¹⁹ Who would fardels bear,

To grunt and sweat²⁰ under a weary²¹ life,

But that the dread of something after death,

The undiscovered country, from whose bourn²²

No traveller returns, puzzles²³ the will,

And makes us rather bear those ills we have

Than fly to others that we know not of?

Thus conscience does make cowards²⁴ of us all,

And thus the native hue²⁵ of resolution

Is sicklied o'er²⁶ with the pale cast²⁷ of thought,

And enterprise of great pitch²⁸ and moment²⁹

With this regard³⁰ their currents turn awry³¹

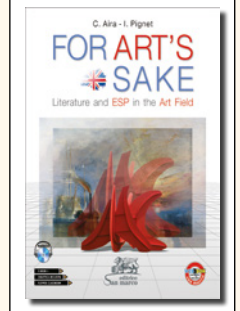
And lose the name of action. – Soft you now,

The fair Ophelia! – Nymph, in thy orisons³²

Be all my sins remembered.

GLOSSARY

1 blows 2 conclusion 3 in a devoted way 4 perhaps 5 yes 6 problem, obstacle 7 thrown away the body 8 make us reflect 9 idea 10 blows and contempt 11 injustice 12 insult 13 pains 14 looked on with contempt 15 powerful people 16 insults 17 from 18 settlement of debts 19 sharp knife 20 complain and suffer 21 tiring 22 border 23 confuses 24 people lacking courage 25 colour (red) 26 made ill 27 shade 28 impact 29 force 30 as a result 31 change direction 32 your prayers



ACTIVITIES

Text comprehension

1 Answer the following questions.

- 1 What is Hamlet doing in this scene?
- 2 'To be, or not to be' is the most famous line in English literature. What does it mean?
- 3 How would you define Hamlet's mood?

2 Decide whether the following statements are true **T** or false **F** and correct the false ones.

- 1 The 'outrageous fortune' brings problems and troubles to human beings. T F
- 2 Living happily is a solution 'devoutly to be wished'. T F
- 3 People are not afraid of dying. T F
- 4 The 'undiscovered country' Hamlet refers to is the afterlife. T F
- 5 Conscience makes men brave and courageous. T F
- 6 Men cannot easily take a decision about suicide. T F

Writing

3 List the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' that man has to bear according to Hamlet.

Vocabulary & style

- 4 Hamlet uses powerful images to develop his reasoning. Focus on the first lines and underline the military metaphors referring to the difficulties of life.
- 5 Consider the structure of the soliloquy: it is rich in questions and infinitive verbs. Underline some examples. What do they convey? What characteristics do they give the speech?