

Merchant of Venice:

In Venice, young Bassanio needs a loan of 3,000 so that he can properly woo a wealthy heiress of Venice named Portia. To get the money, Bassanio entreats his friend Antonio, a merchant. Antonio's money, unfortunately, is invested in merchant ships that are presently at sea; however, to help his friend, Antonio arranges for a short-term loan of the money from Shylock, a Jewish usurer. Shylock strikes a terrible bargain: the 3,000 ducats must be repaid in three months, or Shylock will exact a pound of flesh from Antonio. The merchant agrees to this, confident in the return of his ships before the appointed date of repayment.

At this stage of the play, Portia is introduced: due to her father's will, all suitors must choose from among three coffers—one of which contains a portrait of her. If a man chooses the right one, he may marry Portia; however, if he chooses wrong, he must vow never to marry or even court another woman. Several princes fail this test and are turned away. Bassanio travels to Belmont for the test. Once there, he chooses the lead casket, which is the correct one, and happily agrees to marry Portia that very night.

In contrast to this happiness, Antonio finds himself in a pinch. Two of his ships have already wrecked in transit, and Antonio's creditors—including the vengeance-minded Shylock—are grumbling about repayment. Word comes to Bassanio about Antonio's predicament, and he hastens back to Venice, leaving Portia behind. Portia, however, travels after him with her maid, Nerissa; they disguise themselves as a lawyer and clerk, respectively. When Bassanio arrives, the loan is in default and Shylock is demanding his pound of flesh.

A Midsummer Night's Dream:

Lysander loves Hermia, and Hermia loves Lysander. Helena loves Demetrius; Demetrius used to love Helena but now loves Hermia. According to Athenian law, Hermia is given four days to choose between Demetrius, life in a nunnery, or a death sentence. Hermia, ever defiant, chooses to escape with Lysander into the surrounding forest.

Complications arise in the forest. The King and Queen of Fairies are locked in a dispute over a boy whom the Queen has adopted. The King instructs his servant to bring him magic love drops, which he will sprinkle on the Queen's eyelids as she sleeps, whereupon she will fall in love with the first creature she sees upon awakening. Meanwhile, Helena and Demetrius have also fled into the woods after Lysander and Hermia. The King, overhearing Demetrius's denouncement of Helena, takes pity upon her and tells his servant to place the magic drops upon the eyelids of Demetrius as well, so that Demetrius may fall in love with Helena. The servant, however, makes the mistake of putting the drops on the eyelids of Lysander instead. Helena stumbles over Lysander in the forest, and the spell is cast; Lysander now desires Helena and renounces a stunned Hermia.

Twelfth Night:

Viola has been shipwrecked in a violent storm off the coast of Illyria; in the process she has lost her twin brother, Sebastian. She disguises herself as a boy and assumes the name Cesario for protection. Thus disguised, Viola becomes a page in the service of Orsino, the Duke. It seems that Orsino is having little luck courting Olivia, who is in mourning for the deaths of her father and brother. As Orsino's proxy, Viola is sent to Olivia with love letters. Viola refuses to budge until she is let in to see Olivia; Olivia, intrigued by the impudent young "boy," contrives to get "Cesario" to return by sending her steward, Malvolio, after her with one of Olivia's rings. Viola realizes to her dismay that Olivia has fallen for her Cesario rather than Duke Orsino—further complicated by the fact that Viola has had stirrings herself for Orsino.

Hamlet:

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, has multiple woes. The ghost of his father haunts Elsinore; his uncle, Claudius, has married Queen Gertrude, his mother, and assumed the throne; and Fortinbras of Norway threatens Denmark with an invading army. When Hamlet meets the ghost, his dead father reveals that Claudius poisoned him—and the ghost demands that Hamlet exact revenge. In order to carry this out, Hamlet feigns madness; as part of his insanity, he scorns the affections of Ophelia, daughter of Polonius, to whom he had made romantic overtures. Polonius grows concerned over the apparent insanity that has beset Hamlet and reveals it to the King and Queen. Meanwhile, Hamlet struggles to convince himself that Claudius is the murderer of his father, and in an attempt to "catch the king's conscience," Hamlet convinces a traveling troupe of actors to perform a play in which the action closely resembles the events related to him by the ghost.

Romeo and Juliet:

Verona is home to two feuding noble houses, the Montagues and the Capulets. In response to the constant brawling between members of these families, the Prince of Verona has issued an edict that will impose a death sentence on anyone caught dueling. Against this backdrop, young Romeo of the house of Montague has recently been infatuated with Rosaline, a niece of Capulet. Rosaline is quickly forgotten, however, when Romeo and his friends disguise themselves and slip into a masque ball at Capulet's house. During the festivities, Romeo catches his first glimpse of Juliet, Capulet's daughter. In one of Shakespeare's most memorable scenes, Romeo steals into the garden and professes his love to Juliet, who stands above on her balcony. The two young lovers, with the aid of Friar Laurence, make plans to be married in secret.

King Lear:

King Lear, the aging King of Britain, determines to split his domain evenly between his three daughters: Goneril, Regan, and the young Cordelia. Goneril, when asked, gushes her protestations of love for her father; Regan follows with even more flattery. Cordelia, however, is sincere in her love of Lear, and she declines to pander to him—she simply says she loves him the way a daughter should love her father. Lear is put off by this lack of pomp and disinherits her, although the King of France says that he would be proud to marry her. When one of his lords, Kent, tries to reason with him, Lear banishes him from the kingdom.

Macbeth:

Macbeth is one of King Duncan's greatest war captains. Upon returning from a battle with the rebellious Thane of Cawdor, Macbeth and Banquo encounter three witches. A prophecy is given to them: Macbeth is hailed as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and King; Banquo is hailed as the father of kings to come. With that, the witches evaporate into the mists. Both men nervously laugh off the prophecies until Duncan informs Macbeth that he is to assume Cawdor's title as a reward for his service to the king. When Lady Macbeth is informed of the events, she determines to push her husband's resolve in the matter—she wants him to take his fate into his own hands and make himself king. While Macbeth at first is reluctant to do harm to Duncan, when Duncan makes arrangements to visit the castle the opportunity presents itself too boldly to ignore.