

GETTING TO KNOW...

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

(1564-1616)

VISUAL LESSON
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

VIDEO
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



VIDEO



LEAD IN

1 Look at the picture, representing a contemporary graffiti portrait of William Shakespeare as a rugby player. Then answer the following questions.

1. What elements make you recognise him as Shakespeare?
2. The picture combines the two main meanings of the word 'player': what are they?
3. The word 'player' comes from the verb 'to play'. What does it suggest about the nature of 'acting'?

Share your ideas with the rest of the class.

VOCABULARY Lab

2 Read the paragraphs and find the English translations of the following words (1-8).

1. commerciante
2. istruzione
3. drammaturgo
4. teatri
5. chiusi
6. peste
7. azionista
8. inscenati



BEYOND THE BOOKSHELF

Not everyone appreciated Shakespeare's incredible talent and success when he was alive. Robert Greene, for example, a famous playwright of the Elizabethan age, openly accused Shakespeare of unjustified success and plagiarism by calling him an 'upstart crow' who was 'beautified with our feathers'.

Who was William Shakespeare?

The official version of Shakespeare's life. Much information about Shakespeare's life is based on later reconstructions. Shakespeare **was born in Stratford-upon-Avon** (Warwickshire) and was baptised on 26th April 1564. Since it was common in the Elizabethan age to baptise children only a few days after their birth, he was probably born on April 23rd, St. George's Day. His father was a rich merchant and allowed him to attend the local grammar school and to receive a good education. In particular, Shakespeare could read and understand Latin, but not Greek. In 1582 **Shakespeare married a local woman, Anne Hathaway**, who was eight years older than him. The couple had three children, one of whom was probably called Hamnet (a name that recalls that of the protagonist of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*). Almost **nothing is known about Shakespeare's life from 1584, when he left Stratford to make his fortune in London, to 1592**: for this reason these are called the 'lost years'. In 1592 we know that **Shakespeare was active in London as an actor and a playwright**. Theatres were shut down because of the plague in the same year and Shakespeare could not perform his plays until 1594 when theatres were reopened. In 1594 Shakespeare started working for The Chamberlain's Men, a company of actors protected by the **Lord Chamberlain**: Shakespeare was the main playwright and a shareholder of the company, which soon became the best in London. **In 1599 the company built their own playhouse, called The Globe**, where many of Shakespeare's plays were staged. In 1603, when James I succeeded Elizabeth to the throne, the company went under the protection of the king and was called 'King's Men'. Shakespeare worked for them until 1611, when he retired from the stage. He died in Stratford in 1616, probably on the same day as his birth: April 23rd.

→ *Shakespeare reading to Queen Elizabeth I* by John James Chalon (1900), oil on canvas.



LISTENING

3 **024** Read a text about the connections between Shakespeare and Italy and choose a word or phrase below to complete the sentences. There is an example at the beginning. (0 = lost years). Then listen and check.

Denmark | Holy Inquisition | Italian | lost years | marital infidelity | Messina | political | port of London | Venice

Was Shakespeare Italian? Italy appears so frequently in his plays that some suggest that the English bard actually travelled in Italy at some time in the so-called ‘0 lost years’, although there is no evidence to support this. More surprisingly, there are even some scholars who argue that William was in fact an **1**

Martino Iuvara’s book *Shakespeare era Italiano* (2002) suggests that Shakespeare was not born in Stratford in April 1564 but was born as Michelangelo Florio Crollalanza in **2** His parents, Iuvara sustains, were Giovanni Florio, a doctor, and Guglielma Crollalanza, a Sicilian noblewoman. The family is then said to have fled Italy during the **3** and to have moved to London. This is where Michelangelo Florio Crollalanza changed his name; Crollalanza, it seems, means ‘shakes spear’. Few people take this theory seriously. Curiously, nobody has ever suggested that Shakespeare was in reality Danish or even that he visited **4**, but this did not prevent him from writing *Hamlet*. Shakespeare may have learnt Italian as many educated contemporaries did. He knew John Florio, the humorist scholar who was tutor to his patron, the Earl of Southampton. He would certainly have met Italian merchants who arrived at the **5** and he certainly had access to a good library, which could provide sources for his Italian plots. Italy is frequently present in Shakespeare’s plots – with stories like *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *The Merchant of* **6** and many more. There are good reasons for this. Italy was a guarantee of box office success, associated as it was with passion, love, sex, murder, political battles. Keeping his plot lines distant from the England of his day was also a way to tackle serious **7** and moral questions without running into problems of censorship or even accusations of treason – anti-Semitism, political assassinations, **8** all offered great stories as long as they were kept far (in place and in time) from England under Elizabeth or James.



↑ Image used in the poster of the film *Anonymous* directed by Roland Emmerich (2011), Columbia Pictures.

COMPREHENSION

4 Write a summary of Shakespeare’s life using the following bullet points.

- date, year and place of birth
- education
- the Globe
- death
- family background
- the London years
- retirement



Focus on...

SHAKESPEARE’S GREATNESS

- Shakespeare’s plays have been translated into basically **all the languages** in the world.
- Shakespeare ‘invented’ **approximately 3000 English words** and wrote some of the most quoted lines ever written or spoken in English.
- Shakespeare is a **timeless and universal author**. Readers of all ages, nationalities, and epochs have always found his plays and characters relevant to them by the universal themes they explore.
- Shakespeare’s influence on cinema is **enormous**. Shakespeare and his characters have influenced the development of cinema since its very early origins. The most famous film adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays are: the musical *West Side Story* (1961) based on *Romeo and Juliet*, Kenneth Branagh’s *Hamlet* (1996), *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), and *Anonymous* (2011).
- Shakespeare has become a **‘pop icon’ and a symbol of Englishness**. His creatures have been adapted and adopted by various cultural domains, such as music, advertising, and merchandising.

GETTING TO KNOW...

SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS



LEAD IN

1 Look at these titles of Shakespeare's plays. Then answer the following questions.

- Which titles do you know?
- What do you know about them?

VOCABULARY Lab

2 Read the paragraphs. Then match the Italian words (1-8) with their English equivalents (a-h).

Write a letter in the boxes.

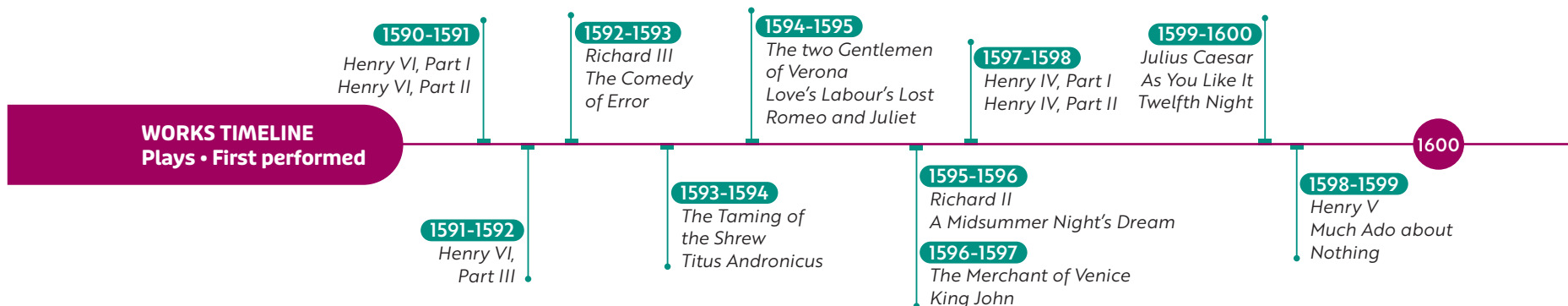
- | | | | | | |
|----------------|--------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|-------------|---------------|
| 1. immaginario | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5. errato | <input type="checkbox"/> | a. set | e. dark |
| 2. solitudine | <input type="checkbox"/> | 6. felicemente | <input type="checkbox"/> | b. fate | f. loneliness |
| 3. oscuro | <input type="checkbox"/> | 7. destino | <input type="checkbox"/> | c. happily | g. fictional |
| 4. ambientato | <input type="checkbox"/> | 8. vizi | <input type="checkbox"/> | d. mistaken | h. vices |

The main characteristics of Shakespeare's plays

1. How they have been transmitted. During Shakespeare's time plays were not supposed to be printed. Shakespeare's plays represent an exception as they were collected and printed as a single volume (called 'First Folio') in 1623 by two of Shakespeare's fellow actors. Without their intervention Shakespeare's plays would have probably been nothing but titles today.

- 2. The dramatic structure.** Shakespeare's plays are normally divided into 5 acts and follow this typical scheme:
- **Act 1** normally introduces the main characters and the basic ingredients of the play (e.g. main topic; conflicts among characters; problems to be solved).
 - in **Act 2** the problem(s) introduced in Act 1 start to become bigger, causing characters to experience conflicts and difficult situations.
 - in **Act 3** the dramatic action and the tension among the characters reach a climax.
 - **Act 4** explores the consequences of the conflict and is often characterised by an event that changes the course of things.
 - in **Act 5** all conflicts come to a conclusion and a solution (either positive or tragic) is found.

Shakespeare interprets this scheme with incredible freedom: in fact, his plays often include one or more sub-plots, and time and place settings often change very quickly.

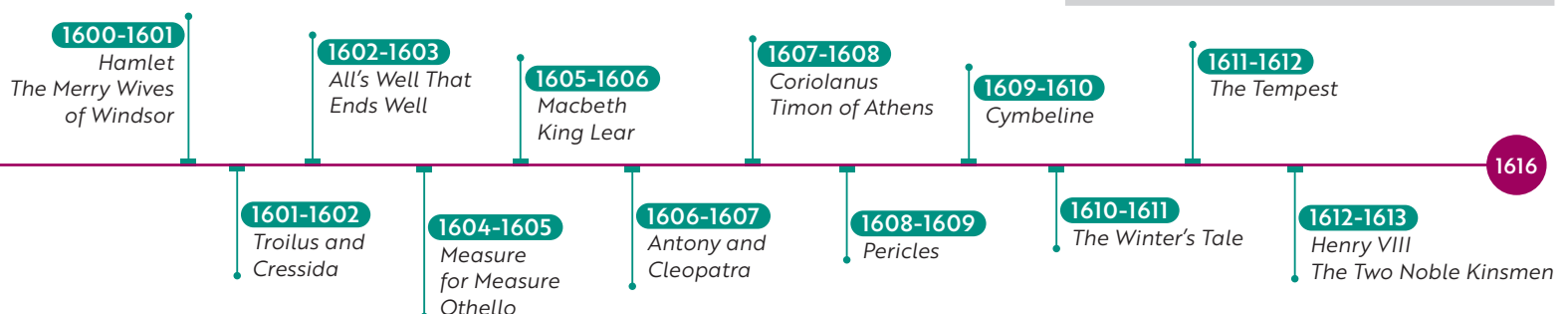


3. The way in which characters are portrayed. Shakespeare's characters are among the most vivid dramatic creatures in the history of Western drama. Rather than being static characters as in the tradition of mediaeval drama, Shakespeare's characters are fascinating, fully-rounded individuals who experience strong emotions and innumerable transformations. Shakespeare's characters can be either historical or fictional and represent all human types and all social strata: thanks to the variety of human types they embody, they show that 'all the world's a stage'.

4. The main themes. Shakespeare's plays explore various universal themes, each of which is interpreted from many angles. They are:

- **Love:** from whatever angle it is explored – lust, affection, youthful passion, mature relationship, friendship – love is probably one of the most popular themes of Shakespeare's plays. These plays offer a viewpoint on the ways in which humans of all times have always explored this universal feeling.
- **Power and leadership:** many of Shakespeare's plays explore the dynamics of power and the meaning of 'leadership', offering suggestions, models, and practical examples for leaders of all times to establish, maintain, and promote leadership.
- **The human condition:** all of Shakespeare's plays offer a deep analysis of the meaning of 'being human', exploring universal topics such as loneliness, fear, the role and nature of the soul, immortality and death, and freedom.
- **Appearance and reality:** in many of his plays, Shakespeare highlights the dichotomy between 'appearance' and 'reality' and explores the power of language to reveal and disguise the truth.
- **Order and chaos:** in his 'Great Tragedies', Shakespeare challenges the Renaissance assumption that the universe is ruled by order by showing what happens when humans break the universal order with their actions, opening the way to chaos.
- **Theatre:** one of the most peculiar traits of Shakespeare's plays is their constant reference to the world of theatre itself, which Shakespeare explores as a metaphor for life and human existence.

5. The language. One of the most potent tools Shakespeare uses in his plays is 'language'. In his hands, English becomes an incredibly versatile and flexible instrument to help the audience envision the imaginary worlds in which the actions of Shakespeare's plays happen. The language of Shakespeare's plays is rich in conceits, metaphors, and unusual combinations of words and is characterised by the alternation between prose and verse. When characters speak using poetry, they use the iambic pentameter, which follows the natural rhythm of the English language.



Shakespeare's Canon

In the 1623 First Folio, Shakespeare's plays were categorised into three main groups:

- **Histories:** plays based on historical facts.
- **Comedies:** light plays that often end with a reconciliation.
- **Tragedies:** dark plays that normally end with a final catastrophe.

Today Shakespeare's works are often organised into different categories based on their dramatic structure, time of composition, style, and main themes. Here are some of these categories:

- **English history plays:** Shakespeare wrote many plays about the history of England from the Hundred Years' War with France to the War of the Roses, giving us a picture of mediaeval and Early Modern England. Some of his history plays include *Richard III* (1593), *Richard II* (1595) and *Henry V* (1599).
- **Roman plays:** Shakespeare wrote three plays based on Roman history: *Julius Caesar* (1599), *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606) and *Coriolanus* (1608). These plays are set in ancient Rome and focus on power - how it is gained, how it changes those who have it, and how dangerous it can be.
- **Comedies:** what ties Shakespeare's comedies together is that many are inspired by Italian short stories (*novelle*) and often involve themes like marriage, mistaken identities, and typically end happily. Some examples of his comedies are *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595) and *The Merchant of Venice* (1596).
- **Problem plays/Dark comedies:** this group includes plays like *All's Well that Ends Well* (1602), *Troilus and Cressida* (1602), *Measure for Measure* (1604). These plays have a 'dark' and pessimistic tone and are called 'problem plays' because they revolve around characters who have doubts.
- **Tragedies:** after *Titus Andronicus* (1593), a typical 'revenge tragedy', *Romeo and Juliet* (1595), a 'lyrical tragedy' focused on love, and *Hamlet* (1601), which many consider the first 'modern' tragedy, Shakespeare wrote his 'great' tragedies - *Othello* (1604), *King Lear* (1605) and *Macbeth* (1605-6) - between 1604 and 1606. These plays explore deep and serious themes such as the tragic fate of humanity, human folly, and the loneliness of individuals in the universe.
- **Romances:** Shakespeare's last plays - such as *Cymbeline* (1610), *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* (1611-12) - are called 'romances': they explore the contrast between vices and virtues and are often called 'tragicomedies' because they include elements of tragedy and comedy.



↑ *Richard III* by Antic Disposition's thrilling production (2017), London.

CHECKPOINT

3 Match the themes with their corresponding group of plays in Shakespeare's Canon.

1. human follies and loneliness
2. vices and virtues
3. Roman history
4. marriage and mistaken identities
5. doubt and pessimism
6. English Mediaeval and Early Modern history



ORACY Lab PRESENTATION

4 Write a short oral presentation in which you point out the main genres and themes of Shakespeare's plays.

← Scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Titania and Bottom by Edwin Landseer (1851), oil on canvas, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.