

# Dramatic Endings

By *Sarah Gudgeon*

## I Read

William Shakespeare, the world famous sixteenth century English playwright from Stratford-upon-Avon has been interpreted, performed and translated in a **myriad** of ways ever since his work was first put in the public arena. Part of the popularity of his scripts is that different audiences look for and find different meanings in his work. This can also be influenced by the social and political conditions of the time. For example, in the 1700 and 1800s, audiences wanted happy endings and so that's what theatre companies gave them: Romeo and Juliet did not die tragically but instead lived happily ever after, and King Lear lived to be a happy old man with his daughter by his side for example.

In the 19th and 20th century, Shakespeare's plays were seen to support the hierarchy of society with royalty and aristocracy at the top of the pyramid and the poor and uneducated at the bottom. Bottom, a **weaver** who wants to play the lion in the play within the play of a 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' and his use of **malapropisms** is a clear example of the ridicule Shakespeare reserved for the working classes. The name 'Bottom' of course could not be any more ridiculous.

In modern times though, as people rebel against the class system and the gap between rich and poor, Bottom is one of Shakespeare's best loved characters. He is good fun and despite his **lack** of formal education tries his best to improve his life by learning about the theatre and developing his skills. He could almost be seen as inspirational.

How will Shakespeare be interpreted in the second half of the twenty-first century? Well, we'll just have to wait and see but whatever happens, his plays are sure to enjoy continued global success and provide entertainment and cause for reflection for audiences everywhere.

## Glossary:

- myriad: a lot, varied
- weaver: an artisan who makes things like rugs from cloth.
- malapropisms: the use of the incorrect word in a certain context. Confusion occurs when the words sound similar. For example, Bottom said he would 'aggravate' his lion's roar, when the correct word should be 'mitigate' or indeed 'lower'.
- lack: when you don't have something

**2 Complete the sentences**

- a. William Shakespeare is ...
- b. Shakespeare's scripts are popular because ...
- c. In the 1700s and 1800s ...
- d. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century ...
- e. In modern times ...
- f. In the future ...

**3 Match each play to the correct genre and famous quote?**

- |                              |                     |
|------------------------------|---------------------|
| a. Romeo and Juliet          | 1. historical       |
| b. Hamlet                    | 2. comedy           |
| c. Julius Ceasar             | 3. romantic tragedy |
| d. A Midsummer Night's Dream | 4. drama            |

To be or not to be: that is the question

The course of true love never did run smooth.

What's in a name? That which we call a rose, By any other word would smell as sweet

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears.

**4 [Go to this website to read plot summaries for the plays in exercise 3.](#)**

**5 Write your own modern day happy ending for a Shakespeare play of your choice.**

# Teachers Notes

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## 2 Example answers

- a. William Shakespeare is a 16<sup>th</sup> century playwright from Stratford-upon-Avon in England
- b. Shakespeare's scripts are popular because people look for and find different meanings in them
- c. In the 1700 and 1800s people wanted happy endings and so theatre companies changed the plays accordingly.
- d. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Shakespeare's plays supported the hierarchy of society with royalty and aristocracy at the top and the poor at the bottom.
- e. In modern times people like the working class characters that some say Shakespeare tried to ridicule.
- f. In the future we'll have to see how the next generation interprets Shakespeare's plays.

## 3 Match each play to the correct genre and famous quote

Before exercise 3 ask the students about the kinds of films/ TV programmes/ plays they like. Try and elicit the various genres such as romantic, comedy, dramatic, historical and tragic. and emphasise that sometimes one production can encompass more than one genre.

To be or not to be: that is the question. **b4**

The course of true love never did run smooth. **d2**

What's in a name? That which we call a rose, By any other word would smell as sweet. **a3**

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears. **c1**

#### 4

If students don't have access to the internet in class then print out and photocopy one plot summary per group. Each group then has to present their summary to the rest of the class.

#### **5 Write your own modern day happy ending for a Shakespeare play of your choice.**

Before completing exercise 5, encourage students to think about would what happen to Romeo and Juliet today for example. Would they be so afraid of the reaction of their families or would they be more open about their marriage? Ask them to imagine how life would have been different for Hamlet if his uncle hadn't betrayed his father.