



Shakespeare Mini-Books

**8 Reproducible Comic Book–Style Retellings of Favorite Plays
That Will Wow Kids With the Works & Words of Shakespeare**

by Jeannette Sanderson

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SCHOLASTIC
Teaching
Resources

Dedication

For all teachers who inspire a love of language in their students

Acknowledgments

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Hamlet

Hamlet, written around 1600 and first published in 1603, is probably Shakespeare’s most famous play, and certainly one of his most widely discussed. Experts consider this play an enigma—it raises far more questions than it answers.

The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark was the first of Shakespeare’s great tragedies. It was also the first play that introduced—in Shakespeare’s writing and in Western drama—a new kind of literary subjectivity, in which the audience gets to know what is happening inside a character’s head. In fact, Hamlet is so contemplative that some critics have cited this thinking in place of action as one of his character flaws.

Though the play deals with many Renaissance ideas—honor, revenge, justice, political order, stoicism, and friendship—it



is actually based on an ancient story that was passed along orally until Saxo Grammaticus wrote it in the 12th century in his *Historica Danica*. Shakespeare modernized the story and made the play his own by his use of language. He introduced more than 600 words in *Hamlet*; many of them do not appear in any other English text.

Activity: Invite students to write and perform a brief skit in which a group of actors performs the scene where the king is murdered by his brother. Students may include Hamlet, Queen Gertrude, and King Claudius in the audience, and incorporate their reactions to the mini-play into the skit.

BARD CARD Hamlet

Plot Summary: In this tragedy, Prince Hamlet learns that his uncle murdered his father and married his mother to become king. The events take place in Elsinore, Denmark, around 1200.

Main Characters

- Hamlet:** Prince of Denmark
- King Claudius:** Hamlet’s uncle (his late father’s brother), his mother’s new husband
- Queen Gertrude:** Hamlet’s mother, new wife of King Claudius
- Polonius:** a lord
- Laertes:** Polonius’s son
- Ophelia:** Hamlet’s beloved, Polonius’s daughter
- Horatio:** Hamlet’s friend
- Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:** Hamlet’s former friends

Glossary

- afflicts:** troubles
- ought:** anything
- ay:** yes
- battlements:** a wall with open spaces that is used for defense
- beckons:** calls
- beseech:** beg
- bier:** a coffin and its stand
- bore:** carried
- envenom’d:** poisoned
- fain:** willing
- glean:** find out
- issue:** outcome
- lament:** cry of grief
- perchance:** maybe
- stalk:** to walk stiffly
- unprevailing:** uncommon
- woe:** grief, sadness

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Julius Caesar

Julius Caesar, probably written around 1599, was the first of Shakespeare's Roman plays, and his earliest tragedy.

The play explores the conflict between principle and pragmatism. Shakespeare shows that brutal pragmatism may sometimes serve society better than noble idealism. Despite Brutus's best intentions, Rome was a more stable, just, and free place when Caesar was alive.

Shakespeare strongly believed in the divine quality of kingship and the stability it provided. Around the time *Julius Caesar* was written, Queen Elizabeth I was nearing the end of her rule and had yet to name an heir. Shakespeare was anticipating the chaos that could follow if sovereign power was not transferred in traditional, accepted ways.

Shakespeare based this play on Thomas



North's 1579 English translation of *Plutarch's Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*. In his play, Shakespeare condensed into three days events that in actuality took place over a period of three years.

Activity: Divide the class into pairs. Assign each pair a controversial topic (e.g., year-round school, school uniforms), and have each student in the pair choose a side, pro or con. Have students write and present short speeches, in pairs, to the class. Discuss with the class how each speech swayed their thinking, and which parts of each speech moved them. Ask how this compares to what happened at Caesar's funeral after Brutus and Antony each spoke.

BARD CARD Julius Caesar

Plot Summary: This tragedy is Shakespeare's version of the murder of the ancient Roman ruler Julius Caesar (100–44 B.C.) and the eventual defeat of the conspirators who killed him.

Main Characters

- Julius Caesar:** dictator of Rome
- Mark Antony:** Caesar's friend
- Marcus Brutus:** a conspirator against Caesar
- Caius Cassius:** a conspirator against Caesar
- Octavius Caesar:** Caesar's grandnephew
- Calpurnia:** Caesar's wife

Glossary

- Et tu, Brute:** You too, Brutus
- Forum:** the center and public meeting place of the city
- ides of March:** March 15th
- ingrafted:** deep
- issue:** deed
- legions:** large military forces
- oration:** a formal speech
- redress:** correct
- soothsayer:** prophet
- Tarquin:** an earlier Roman ruler who was overthrown
- whelped:** gave birth

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

King Lear

King Lear, probably written around 1605–1606, is one of Shakespeare’s tragic masterpieces, though, not a completely original one. The earliest account of the tale is in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s 12th-century *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Shakespeare probably used Raphael Holinshed’s 1587 version in *The Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande*.

Shakespeare also drew from current events in writing this play. In 1603, the two eldest daughters of Sir Brian Annesley sued to have their father declared legally insane so they could take over his estate. His youngest daughter, Cordell, protested on his behalf. Whatever his sources, Shakespeare made the story immeasurably moving and all his own.



King Lear is mostly a domestic play, dealing with a family’s fears and tensions. In Shakespeare’s time, the father held sovereignty over his family just as a king held sovereignty over his land. The play also explores other themes, including power and powerlessness, appearance and reality, wisdom and folly, youth and age, and sight and blindness (both physical and intellectual).

Activity: Ask each student to write a one-page essay, telling what they think a child owes his or her parents, and how they think Shakespeare’s three daughters measured up to what they believe are a child’s filial duties. Invite students to share their essays and discuss the question: What does a child owe his or her parents?

BARD CARD King Lear

Plot Summary: *King Lear*, which takes place in Britain in the first century B.C., is the story of an old king whose foolish pride causes him to lose his kingdom, the only daughter who loves him, and his life.

Main Characters

- King Lear:** old king of Britain
- Goneril:** Lear’s first daughter
- Regan:** Lear’s second daughter
- Cordelia:** Lear’s youngest and once-favorite daughter
- Earl of Kent:** King Lear’s friend
- Earl of Gloucester:** Lear’s honest subject
- Duke of Albany:** Goneril’s honest husband
- Duke of Cornwall:** Regan’s husband
- Edgar:** Earl of Gloucester’s legitimate son
- Edmund:** Earl of Gloucester’s traitorous illegitimate son

Glossary

- apprehension:** arrest
- banish’d:** exiled; required to leave the country
- dowry:** the money, goods, or estate that a woman brings to her husband in marriage
- hovel:** hut
- overture:** introduction
- pawn:** a person that can be used to further the purposes of another person
- procure:** bring about
- rack:** an instrument of torture on which a body is stretched
- raiment:** clothing
- steward:** supervisor of servants
- stocks:** a wooden frame with holes in which the feet and hands can be locked as punishment
- tempest:** a violent storm
- vouchsafe:** to grant or furnish
- writ:** a written order