CYMBELINE

Cymbeline is King of Britain; his first wife died, and he married a wicked queen. Imogen, Cymbeline's daughter is in love with Posthumus, but her stepmother wants Imogen to marry Cloten, the queen's son. When Imogen balks and secretly marries Posthumus, the king has him banished. Before his departure, Posthumus gives Imogen a bracelet, and he gives her a ring. Posthumus arrives in Rome, where he brags of his wife's beauty and fidelity. When Iachimo questions this, he and Posthumus propose a wager that Iachimo can't seduce Imogen. Iachimo hastens to Britain, where he is rebuffed several times by Imogen. Meanwhile, the malicious stepmother has arranged for her physician to create a poison for Pisanio, a servant and friend of Posthumus. The physician, distrustful of the wicked queen, prepares instead a type of sleeping potion. This is given to Pisanio.

Iachimo, still striving for Imogen, is nothing if not crafty. The rogue hides in a chest carried into Imogen's room, then steals her bracelet while she sleeps. He also takes note of a mole not easily seen. Armed with detail and her bracelet, Iachimo tells Posthumus that he has won the bet, whereupon Posthumus gives up the ring that Imogen gave him. Posthumus, considerably peeved at Imogen, sends a letter to Britain instructing Pisanio to kill her for him. Pisanio instead warns Imogen of the anger of Posthumus, and Imogen flees Cymbeline's court disguised as a page. He also gives the potion, which he believes is a "sovereign restorative," to Imogen. While this is happening, Cymbeline angers Lucius, a Roman ambassador to the point that Rome declares war on Britain over an unpaid tribute to Caesar.

Imogen, in the meantime, gets lost and encounters Belarius, a banished noble who kidnapped Cymbeline's two sons (Guiderius and Arviragus) as infants twenty years before. Imogen, still disguised as the page Fidele, is invited to stay with them. Cloten, however, soon appears on the scene; disguised in Posthumus's clothes, he is on the hunt for Imogen and Posthumus (who he believes to be in Milford Haven). There he encounters Guiderius, who slays Cloten after being insulted. He then cuts off Cloten's head and tosses it into the river. Meanwhile, Imogen has been feeling ill and has taken the Queen's potion, which has made her seem dead. Belarius and the sons lay her beside Cloten's dead body, which, being disguised, is mistaken by Imogen for Posthumus when she awakens, and promptly faints. When she recovers, the despairing Imogen (still disguised as Fidele) accepts service as a page with Lucius (who happens by as she comes to).

Meanwhile, the war continues, and at the court of Cymbeline, the Queen has begun to go mad from the disappearance of Cloten. Posthumus has returned with the invading armies, but disguises himself as a Briton with the hope of dying in battle against the invaders. However, with the aid of Posthumus, Belarius, and the two brothers, the Britons win a glorious battle. Posthumus is later captured and thrown into prison, mistaken for a Roman. There he has a strange prophetic vision. Likewise, Iachimo, Lucius, and Imogen (Fidele) are captured and brought to Cymbeline. The Queen, her condition worsening, confesses her evil doings on her deathbed before expiring. In the ensuing confessions that follow, Iachimo confesses to stealing the bracelet and lying. Posthumus reveals his own identity, Pisanio admits his part in helping Imogen escape, Belarius admits to kidnapping the two boys, and Posthumus and Imogen are reunited and allowed to stay married. A soothsayer interprets Posthumus's vision as the rejoining of Cymbeline's family (which has happened). Finally, Cymbeline releases his prisoners and comes to peaceful terms with Rome.
PERICLES

Pericles correctly guesses that the daughter of Antiochus is involved in an incestuous affair with her father. Antiochus knows that Pericles knows, and Pericles knows it. His life in peril, Pericles prudently flees Antioch for Tyre. Antioch won't let mere distance stand in the way of killing him, however; Pericles appoints his counselor Helicanus to rule as regent and then sails from Tyre for Tarsus, then Pentapolis. On the way, the vessel is shipwrecked, and Pericles is the sole survivor.

At Pentapolis, Pericles participates in a tournament for the hand of Thaisa, daughter of Simonides. He wins the tournament, the two fall in love, and Pericles marries Thaisa. In the meantime, news arrives that Antiochus is dead and that the people of Tyre want their prince back. Pericles makes arrangements to sail for Tyre with Thaisa, who is now pregnant with their child. A storm along the way brings about the birth of Marina, their daughter; Thaisa, tragically, is believed to die in childbirth. Sealing her in a watertight coffin, Pericles gives her a burial at sea. The coffin washes up on the shores of Ephesus, where Cerimon manages to revive Thaisa. Unsurprisingly, Thaisa assumes that Pericles is lost at sea and promptly becomes a votaress in the Temple of Diana.

On the way back to Tyre, Pericles leaves Marina at Tarsus for Cleon and his wife to raise. Pericles sails on for Tyre. Fast forward sixteen years, and a beautiful Marina has inspired the jealousy of Dionyza, who resolves to have her murdered. Dionyza's servant, who is entrusted with the job, cannot carry it out when Marina is captured by pirates; the servant reports back that Marina is dead, and Cleon mournfully raises a monument to her memory. Pericles encounters the tomb on a visit to Tarsus and falls into a deep despair. The pirates, meanwhile, sell Marina into a brothel in Mitylene, but she is soon freed by the governor.

Pericles sails into Mitylene still deeply depressed about the supposed loss of his daughter. While there, he encounters Marina, and after some talking, Pericles eventually recognizes her for his daughter; the two are happily reunited. Lysismachus, the governor, asks for Marina's hand, which Marina accepts. Then, Pericles is visited by a dream that instructs him to visit Ephesus. There he is reunited as well with Thaisa (who is now the head priestess of Diana), and the whole family is together again.

THE TEMPEST

Prospero, a sorcerer and the rightful Duke of Milan, dwells on an enchanted isle with his daughter, Miranda. Twelve years earlier, the duke's brother, Antonio, and Alonso, the King of Naples, conspired to usurp his throne. They set Prospero and Miranda adrift in a boat, and they eventually found themselves marooned on the island. Prospero is served on his island by Ariel, a spirit who he freed from a tree with magic, and Caliban, son of the witch Sycorax. When magic reveals that a ship bearing his old enemies is sailing near the island, Prospero summons a storm to wreck their ship. The survivors make it to shore in scattered groups. Among these is Ferdinand, the son of Alonso. He is lulled to Prospero's abode by the singing of Ariel; there he meets Miranda, who is enthralled with the young prince.

Meanwhile, Antonio, Alonso, Sebastian, and Gonzalo wander the island in search of Ferdinand. Antonio now plots with Sebastian to murder Alonso, but this plot is thwarted by Ariel. Elsewhere on the island, Stephano and Trinculo encounter Caliban. After sharing a few drinks, Caliban tries to enlist the two in a plot to kill Prospero and rule the island himself. He even promises Miranda to Stephano. Ariel, however, reports all these goings-on to Prospero. In the meantime, Miranda and Ferdinand pledge their troth to each other.

Prospero isn't finished with his sport of Antonio and Alonso, either. He creates a magical banquet for the two men that vanishes whenever they try to eat. He also sends Ariel in the guise of a harpy to hound them for their crimes against Prospero. Later, at a masque to celebrate the upcoming marriage of Miranda and Ferdinand, Prospero remembers Caliban's plot and abruptly calls the revels to a halt. He sends Ariel to punish them as well; the spirit does so by first luring them with some fancy clothes, then setting other island spirits upon them in the shape of hunting dogs that chase them around the island.

Finally, Prospero confronts his brother and Alonso, revealing his true identity as the rightful Duke of Milan. He demands that Antonio restore his throne; he also rebukes Sebastian for plotting against his own brother. To Alonso, he reveals Ferdinand alive and well, playing chess with Miranda. As a final act, Prospero abandons his magic and releases Ariel and Caliban from their servitude. From Ariel, Prospero asks for one last boon: calm seas and favorable winds for their trip back to Naples.
THE TWO NOBLE KINSMEN

The Two Noble Kinsmen is essentially an adaptation of Chaucer's Knight's Tale. In this story, the two kinsmen are Palamon and Arcite; they are captured while fighting for Thebes against Athens. While imprisoned, the two cousins find themselves attracted to Emilia, who is the sister of Hippolyta, wife of Theseus. Their professed "eternal friendship" takes a beating as the two vow to woo her. Theseus exiles Arcite from Athens and leaves Palamon in jail.

Arcite has other ideas once he is freed; he disguises himself as a peasant in order to keep an eye on Emilia. Meanwhile, the jailer's daughter has fallen in love with Palamon. She helps him to escape and aids him once he's hiding in the nearby forest. There Arcite encounters him. The two men resume their argument over Emilia and finally decide to duel for her that night. However, as they prepare for the duel, the two are discovered by Theseus. At first he condemns both to death; at the behest of Emilia and Hippolyta, however, the duke attempts to banish them both. Both Palamon and Arcite refuse, so Theseus asks Emilia to choose between them, with the loser being put to death. Emilia, however, can't decide, so Theseus declares that the matter will be settled by combat after all—in one month, Palamon and Arcite will fight for Emilia's hand, with the loser to be executed.

In the meantime, the jailer's daughter has gone mad as a result of her unrequited love for Palamon. Theseus absolves the jailer, who had no part in Palamon's escape, and gives a pardon to his deranged daughter. A doctor attempts to help her by getting the man to whom she's engaged pretend to be Palamon in order to restore her sanity. The time for the contest comes about, and Arcite defeats Palamon. However, fate twists dramatically as Palamon awaits execution; a messenger arrives bringing news of Arcite's mortal wounding suffered in a horse riding accident. Arcite gives Emilia's hand to Palamon before he dies.

THE WINTER'S TALE

When Leontes' old friend Polixenes wishes to leave after a court visit, Leontes asks his wife, Hermione, to try persuading him to stay longer. Hermione succeeds, but Leontes then suspects her of having an affair with Polixenes. His jealousy getting the better of him, Leontes plots to poison Polixenes. Camillo, however, warns Polixenes of Leontes' wrath, and the two escape to Bohemia. Meanwhile, Hermione is thrown in jail and brought to trial for adultery despite the words of the Delphic oracle (who has proclaimed Hermione innocent). While imprisoned, Hermione gives birth to a daughter, which Leontes promptly disowns. He also commands Antigonus, the husband of Paulina, to abandon the baby in the desert. Antigonus does so, but is devoured soon after by a bear.

Tragedy soon besets Leontes as the trial progresses. His only son, Mamilius, dies from grief over his mother's predicament. Hermione too is reported dead by her waiting woman, Paulina. This is enough to make even Leontes realize what his jealousy has cost him; in mourning, he goes into seclusion. In Bohemia, a shepherd discovers the abandoned baby, Perdita, and raises her as his own daughter. Sixteen years later, the son of Polixenes, Florizel, has fallen in love with Perdita; Polixenes, however, is less than pleased that his son, a prince, is in love with a shepherdess. Florizel and Perdita make plans to escape to Sicilia, aided by old Camillo.

In Sicilia, Florizel and Perdita are welcomed at the court of Leontes. Polixenes soon follows (accompanied by the old shepherd), and he and Leontes eventually reconcile. Perdita's identity as the king's daughter is revealed, and Leontes and Polixenes are delighted that their children will be wed. Leontes' new joy, however, is tempered by the bitter memory of Hermione's death. Paulina then takes Leontes and the rest to see a statue of the queen that is actually Hermione herself—the queen has lived in hiding for the past sixteen years. Thus Leontes is reunited with his wife and daughter, his best friend, and his close advisor, Camillo. Even Paulina regains a husband when Leontes promises her hand to Camillo in gratitude for helping Hermione. Hence, everything is set back aright in Sicilia by the end of the play.