ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

Mark Antony is supposed to be ruling the eastern Roman Empire. Cleopatra, however, has all of his attention as the two carry on a torrid affair in Egypt. The death of his wife, Fulvia, and the threat of a war by Pompey bring him back to Rome. There is tension between Octavius and Antony; Octavius feels that Antony has left Rome vulnerable while dallying with Cleopatra. As a gesture of goodwill, Antony agrees to marry Octavia, the sister of Octavius, but this only postpones what is to be a growing rift.

As events transpire, Octavius (now Caesar) and Antony begin to clash with their armies. Octavia tries to repair the damage and get Octavius and Antony back together. To everyone's chagrin, however, Antony seizes the opportunity during Octavia's absence to flee back to Egypt—and Cleopatra. Octavius is now doubly enraged, vowing to punish Antony for dishonoring his sister as well as Caesar. In the battle to come, Cleopatra sways Antony's mind into accepting a challenge from Caesar to a battle at sea; his aids try to tell him that his army has a better chance on land, but Antony will not listen. He will rue the decision.

At the height of the naval battle, Cleopatra orders her personal ship to leave the scene. Unfortunately, a lovestruck Antony orders his ship to follow her, and the battle at Actium becomes a Roman victory. Caesar rejects Antony's suit for peace, and instead attempts to split Antony and Cleopatra; Cleopatra, he decrees, will remain Queen of Egypt unmolested if she but kills Antony. Cleopatra refuses, and Caesar's army meets Antony's on land—resulting in a victory for Antony. The two armies withdraw to resume the fight the next day.

When another Egyptian retreat decides the day for Caesar, Antony accuses Cleopatra of treachery and threatens her life. To save herself, she flees to her tomb and has her servants bring word that she has killed herself. This pushes Antony over the edge, and he falls on his own sword, mortally wounding himself. He lives long enough, however, for the servants to bring him to Cleopatra, and the two once again profess their love before Antony breathes his last. Caesar, upon hearing the news of Antony's death, grieves for the loss of his rival and onetime friend. To Cleopatra he promises mercy, although he intends on humiliating her as a war captive. Cleopatra, recognizing his aims, secures an asp hidden in a fruit basket and uses its venomous bite to kill herself. Caesar decrees that Antony and Cleopatra be buried together as a posthumous act of kindness.

CORIOLANUS

The setting is ancient Italy in the years before the rise of the Roman Empire. The citizens of Rome are disgruntled and mistrustful of the patrician Senate. Marcius holds the rabble in contempt, for the most part, and draws the ire of the plebes by calling them cowards. However, Marcius is Rome's best general, and when the neighboring Volscians wage war upon Rome, Marcius takes their capital, Corioli, single-handedly. In honor of his accomplishment he is given the new name of Coriolanus; Tullus Aufidius, the Volscian general, vows to avenge the defeat.

Coriolanus is given a great welcome back in Rome for his victory, and the Senate wishes to make him a consul. However, he must have popular support to be elected to this position, and two tribunes, Brutus and Sicinius, conspire to reverse the plebes' opinion on him. In turn, Coriolanus denounces the tribunes, even saying that the office itself should be abolished. Volumnia, his mother, attempts to soothe him, but when confronted with the tribunes in front of the people, their insults and accusations are too much for the proud warrior. His temper earns him banishment. Coriolanus angrily travels to Antium.

There Coriolanus meets with Aufidius. He offers himself as a war leader, for Aufidius either to accept or to slay. Aufidius grants him the leadership of half the Volscian army. Though Aufidius chafes under Coriolanus's arrogance, the two generals invade Roman territory, advancing to the very gates of Rome itself. All of Coriolanus's previous friends and allies try to reason with him; however, it takes Volumnia to convince him to negotiate for peace. When Coriolanus returns to the Volscians, he explains that Rome will not be conquered—only to be dragged before the Volscian senators, accused of treason by Aufidius, and unceremoniously stabbed to death.
HAMLET, PRINCE OF DENMARK

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.

While Hamlet, judging the reaction of Claudius, is convinced of the new king's guilt, he can't bring himself to slay him outright. Instead, Hamlet rebukes Gertrude with the news that she is sleeping with the killer of her husband. Unfortunately, Polonius—who is hidden behind a tapestry in the Queen's chamber, eavesdropping—panics and cries for help; Hamlet stabs him, thinking it is Claudius. Of course, when this news is given to Claudius, the King sends Hamlet to England with the ostensible purpose of securing Hamlet's safety and the recovery of his senses. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two childhood friends of Hamlet's who are now little more than spies for Claudius, are to accompany him. The trick is that Hamlet will bear a letter to the King of England in which Claudius asks England to sentence Hamlet to death.

In the midst of these events, Ophelia loses her own sanity; she is driven to madness by Hamlet's condition and the death of Polonius. Laertes, her brother, returns to Elsinore from his studies and vows his vengeance upon Hamlet for what the prince has done to his family. News is brought that Hamlet has returned to Denmark, much to the surprise of Claudius, and that Ophelia has drowned herself in a river. Claudius now plots with Laertes to kill Hamlet upon his return to Elsinore. Meanwhile, Hamlet meets Horatio, his best friend, and tells how he altered the letter so that the execution order was for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern instead of him. At the end of Hamlet's tale, Ophelia's funeral procession enters, and Laertes and Hamlet confront one another. Laertes challenges Hamlet to a duel.

This is all part of Claudius's plot; instead of dull blades, Laertes will select a sharp one. In addition, Laertes is to poison the tip of his blade so that a wound will kill the prince. And, just in case the previous measures are not enough, Claudius will keep a poisoned chalice from which Hamlet will drink. The plan goes awry from the beginning: Laertes is unable to wound Hamlet during the first pass. Between rounds, Gertrude raises a toast to Hamlet with the poisoned chalice. Then, in the heat of the duel, Laertes manages to wound Hamlet but loses the poisoned rapier to him, and Laertes himself is poisoned as well. Gertrude swoons to her death; Laertes falls and reveals the plot against Hamlet, telling him he has "not a half-hour's life" in him. Enraged, Hamlet stabs Claudius with the poisoned foil, then makes him drink from the chalice that slew Gertrude. This done, Hamlet collapses and dies in Horatio's arms as Fortinbras enters the castle. Fortinbras is left to rule Denmark, as the entire royal family is dead, and he bids his men give Hamlet and the rest a proper funeral.
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 disinherit 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. Also introduced are Gloucester's two sons, Edgar and Edmund. Edmund is Gloucester's bastard, and intends to gain his father's inheritance by tricking him into thinking that Edgar is plotting to murder him. Edgar disguises himself as a madman and goes into hiding.

Lear is soon to find out how much love Goneril and Regan actually have for him. Both daughters treat him miserably when he stays with them, and Lear is transformed from a powerful king to an impotent old man with only Kent (who has disguised himself and disobeyed Lear's decree of banishment) and a Fool to accompany him. In the middle of the play, Lear is driven mad by his grief at seeing the true nature of his daughters. On a lonely heath, he rages at a storm. There they encounter Edgar, in his disguise as Tom o' Bedlam. Gloucester helps them, providing shelter and sending them to Dover to meet Cordelia and the French king, who has landed an army in England to come to Lear's aid. For his succor to Lear, Gloucester is betrayed by Edmund and has his eyes put out by Cornwall. However, a servant comes to his aid and manages to deliver a fatal wound to Cornwall before being slain by Regan.

In his poor, blind state, Gloucester encounters Edgar (still disguised). Edgar does not yet reveal himself but leads his father toward Dover. In the meantime, Albany, husband of Goneril, has voiced his displeasure at the treatment of Lear and Gloucester. With Regan becoming a widow, and Goneril seeing her husband as a coward, both women turn their attentions to Edmund as a prospective love interest. While this intrigue is going on, the English and French armies meet on the battlefield; the English win the day. When Lear and Cordelia are taken captive, Edmund gives an order that they be hanged, unbeknownst to Albany. Edgar encounters Edmund, and the two duel, with Edgar giving Edmund a mortal wound. Word also comes that Regan and Goneril are dead; Goneril poisoned Regan to win Edmund from her, then killed herself upon Edmund's defeat. Knowing he is about to die, Edmund repents and reveals his plots—including the impending deaths of Lear and Cordelia.

His repentance will go for nought. Lear enters, bearing Cordelia's body. Overcome by his sorrow, Lear collapses and dies beside his lone loving daughter. Gloucester is dead as well, having been reconciled at the last with Edgar. Kent and Edgar depart, leaving Albany to rule Britain.
MACBETH

Macbeth, Thane of Glamis, 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. If Duncan happens to be inconveniently in the way....

Macbeth at first is reluctant to do harm to Duncan. However, when Duncan makes arrangements to visit the castle, the opportunity presents itself too boldly to ignore. Pressed on by his wife, they plot Duncan's death. Lady Macbeth gets Duncan's attendants drunk; Macbeth will slip in with his dagger, kill the king, and plant the dagger on the drunken guards. Macbeth, in a quiet moment alone, imagines he sees a bloody dagger appear in the air; upon hearing the tolling bells, he sets to work. Immediately Macbeth feels the guilt and shame of his act, as does Lady Macbeth, who nonetheless finds the inner strength to return to Duncan's chamber to plant the dagger on the attendants when Macbeth refuses to go back in there. When the body is discovered, Macbeth immediately slays the attendants—he says out of rage and grief—in order to silence them. Malcolm and Donalbain, Duncan's sons, both flee Scotland (fearful for their own lives). To everyone else, it appears that the sons have been the chief conspirators, and Macbeth is crowned King of Scotland, thus fulfilling the witches' prophecy. Banquo, however, has suspicions of his own based on their encounter with the witches.

Macbeth knows of Banquo's suspicions and the reasons for them; he is also wary of the second prophecy concerning Banquo's offspring. As he prepares for a celebratory banquet on his coronation, Macbeth hires assassins to get rid of Banquo and Fleance, his son. Banquo is murdered that night, but Fleance escapes into the darkness. As Macbeth sits down to the feast, the bloody ghost of Banquo silently torments him, which causes him great despair. Meanwhile, Macduff has fled to England because he too suspects Macbeth of foul play. Macbeth, once a man of greatness, transforms into a man whose conscience has fled him. Upon learning of Macduff's flight, Macbeth exacts revenge by having Macduff's entire household butchered. Macduff grieves, but joins up with Malcolm in England to raise an army against Macbeth.

Macbeth is given another prophecy by the witches as he prepares for Malcolm's assault. His throne is safe until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane, and he will not die by the hand of any man born of a woman. Macbeth feels confident in his chances for victory at this pronouncement. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, has been slowly driven mad by her dreams in the wake of killing Duncan. She sleepwalks, wringing her hands together, and inadvertently reveals her part in the murder. As the English armies approach, Macbeth learns that many of his lords are deserting him, and that Lady Macbeth has died. On top of this, a messenger brings news that Malcolm's army is approaching under the cover of boughs, which they have cut from the trees of Birnam Wood. Resigned now to his fate, Macbeth grimly sets to battle.

None, however, can bring Macbeth down. Finally, Macduff meets him on the field of battle. Macbeth laughs hollowly, telling him of the witches' prophecy: no man born of a woman may slay him. As Macduff retorts, he was "from my mother's womb untimely ripp'd," meaning he was delivered by a Caesarian section (and hence, not technically born of a woman). Grimly, Macbeth presses on. The play ends with the death of Macbeth; Macduff greets the others bearing Macbeth's head. Malcolm is crowned King of Scotland, restoring his father's bloodline to the throne.
OTHELLO

Othello, a Moorish general of Venice, has promoted Cassio as his lieutenant; Iago, who was hoping for the promotion himself, makes plots against both Cassio and Othello to exact revenge. Othello has secretly married Desdemona, the beautiful daughter of Venetian senator Brabantio, and Iago determines to use Desdemona as the means of his revenge. When Othello is posted to Cyprus by the Duke of Venice, Iago escorts Desdemona there to meet him, taking along his own wife, Emilia. When they've arrived in Cyprus, Iago sets his machinations to motion. He tricks Cassio into getting drunk, then has Roderigo—a former suitor of Desdemona whom Iago has convinced to aid him with the hope of winning Desdemona back—pick a fight with Cassio that ends in Cassio's arrest. Because of this, Cassio is demoted. Then Iago has Cassio visit Desdemona, saying that an appeal to her might do well to convince Othello to reinstate him.

This accomplished, Iago goes straightaway to Othello so that he can lead him to where Desdemona and Cassio are talking. As Iago and Othello view the scene, Iago plants seeds of doubt and jealousy in Othello's mind concerning Desdemona's fidelity. The scenario Iago suggests is that Cassio and Desdemona are having an affair. Later, fortune literally drops Desdemona's handkerchief into Iago's hand; he gets the handkerchief from Emilia, who discovered it, plants the handkerchief in Cassio's room, and then tells Othello that he saw Cassio with it. When Othello asks Desdemona about the handkerchief, she tells him that it was lost (which is the truth as she knows it). Cassio, meanwhile, has given the handkerchief to a courtesan with whom he is intimate. Iago manipulates a conversation with Cassio about his courtesan to make it appear to Othello—who is eavesdropping at the behest of Iago—that Cassio is talking about Desdemona.

His smoldering rage now beginning to bubble over, Othello tells Iago to kill Cassio and then angrily confronts Desdemona. In spite of Desdemona's protests of innocence (backed up by Iago's wife, Emilia), Othello is now convinced of her infidelity with Cassio. Iago, meanwhile, has Roderigo attempt to murder Cassio; when Roderigo fails to do more than wound the soldier, Iago slays him so that Roderigo can't implicate him in the affair. Othello strangles Desdemona in her bed. When Emilia discovers the crime, she decries the Moor as a villain and at first refuses to believe that Iago has so evilly manipulated Othello. However, Iago's appearance and subsequent answers lead Emilia to confront the fact that her husband is responsible for this tragedy. When Iago cannot keep Emilia from telling the truth about the handkerchief, he stabs her and attempts to escape; not only is he captured, but letters found on Roderigo's body thoroughly implicate Iago as the treacherous villain that he is. Faced with the shame of having murdered an innocent Desdemona, Othello stabs himself in front of Cassio and dies on Desdemona's bed, beside her.

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 been infatuated with Rosaline, a niece of Capulet. In order to catch some time with her, Romeo and his friends slip into a masque ball at Capulet's house; as a masque affair, they can easily disguise themselves. There, 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. With the aid of Friar Laurence, Romeo makes plans with Juliet to be married in secret.

Tybalt, Juliet's cousin, discovers that Romeo has attended the ball, and he sets out to teach the young Montague a lesson at the point of his sword. Romeo, when challenged by Tybalt, tries to avoid a duel between them as he is now married to Juliet (and hence a relation to Tybalt by this marriage). Mercutio, Romeo's best friend, takes up Tybalt's challenge and is slain in the ensuing fight. Enraged, Romeo slays Tybalt in turn. As a result of the bloodshed—and Romeo's act of vengeance, however provoked—the Prince of Verona proclaims that Romeo is to be banished for his actions. Romeo has time to consummate the marriage and bid farewell to Juliet, though he hopes to be reunited with her soon once the Capulets are aware that Juliet has married him.

The elder Capulets, meanwhile, are pressing for Juliet to marry Paris, a cousin to the Prince. Juliet, again with Friar Laurence's help, takes up a desperate plan to avoid her parent's wishes. She obtains a drug that will make her seem dead for forty-two hours; while she is in this state, Friar Laurence will send word to Romeo of the situation so that he can meet and rescue her in her tomb. Unfortunately, fate will not be so kind; the letter from Friar Laurence is severely delayed. Romeo instead hears news second-hand that Juliet has died. A grief-stricken Romeo purchases poison and hastens to Juliet's tomb to commit suicide at her side. Meanwhile, Friar Laurence has discovered to his horror that his letter did not arrive, and the friar hastens to Juliet's tomb as well to take Juliet away until he can set things aright.

At Juliet's tomb, Romeo encounters Paris, who is mourning for his lost fiancée-to-be. Romeo slays Paris, then enters the tomb and downs the poison. As Friar Laurence comes upon the scene, Juliet awakens only to find the body of her beloved Romeo laying beside her. Juliet takes the dagger from Romeo's belt and plunges it into her heart. The Prince arrives at this point—along with the Montague and Capulet parents—demanding to know what has happened. Friar Laurence relates the tragic tale of Romeo and Juliet's secret marriage; the Montagues and Capulets, when faced with the terrible price that their feud has exacted, vow to put an end to the enmity between the two houses.
TIMON OF ATHENS

Timon is a kind and generous aristocrat in Athens with one major fault—he is a spendthrift. Everyone loves him because of his generosity as a host. When Timon finds himself confronted with creditors, however, his steward, Flavius, can do little more than tell him that he is bankrupt. Timon then sends his servants to his "friends," only to receive excuses in return; no one will lend him money to repay his debts. Angered by this, Timon invites them all to one last feast. The only dish, to everyone's surprise, is warm water. Timon then denounces not only his former comrades but mankind as a whole.

In the meantime, Alcibiades, a captain of Athens, has been pleading against a death sentence given to one of his men by the Senate. For his persistence, Alcibiades is banished; Alcibiades, on the other hand, despises the Senate and decides to turn his army against Athens in revenge. He hears about Timon, who has fled Athens to live a hermit's life. Timon, it seems, was digging for roots to eat and stumbled upon a buried trove of gold. Alcibiades tries to befriend Timon, even offering him money. Timon, however, counters with offers of gold to Alcibiades if he will sack Athens. Alcibiades accepts a portion of the treasure to pay his men, then marches on Athens. More visitors, these in the form of bandits, pay a visit. Timon pays them gold on the condition that they too wreak lawless havoc on Athens. The bandits accept the gold, but Timon's rant stirs them instead, ironically, to give up stealing. Timon even sends away his former steward, Flavius, although with gold in his pockets and more kindness than he has shown to anyone else.

Alcibiades enters Athens with little resistance; the Athenians beg Timon for help, but the only help Timon offers is a tree outside his cave—upon which he says they can hang themselves, each according to his or her will. The senators ingratiates themselves with Alcibiades by giving up his enemies and those that refused to help Timon when he was in debt. Alcibiades agrees, vowing his cave—upon which he says they can hang themselves, each according to his or her will. The senators ingratiates themselves with Alcibiades by giving up his enemies and those that refused to help Timon when he was in debt. Alcibiades agrees, vowing peace in Athens. However, a soldier enters with the sad news that Timon has died in his cave, alone at the end.

TITUS ANDRONICUS

Without a doubt, Titus Andronicus is Shakespeare's bloodiest play. Titus, a Roman general, returns to Rome after a victorious campaign against the Goths. In tow as captives are Tamora and her sons—one of whom, Alarbus, is sacrificed at the hands of the sons of Titus. Saturnius, the newly declared emperor, is feuding with his younger brother, Bassianus; at one point Saturnius attempts to wrest Lavinia (who is Titus's daughter) from Bassianus, although he ends up failing in that and instead being seduced by the captive Queen Tamara. Tamara, all the while, plots with her Moorish lover, Aaron, against Titus.

Demetrius and Chiron, Tamora's other sons, begin the bloodletting in earnest. They encounter and kill the hapless Bassianus in the woods, then rape and mutilate Lavinia, leaving her without a tongue to speak or hands to write. Aaron furthers the revenge against Titus by framing his sons (Quintus and Martius) for the murder of Bassianus. Lucius, Titus's remaining son, attempts a failed rescue for which he is banished from Rome. They also discover Lavinia. At this low point, Aaron tells Titus that the emperor will spare Quintus and Martius if Titus cuts off a hand and sends it to him. This Titus does; however, the hand is soon returned along with the heads of his two sons. Titus is now on the brink of insanity. Lucius, meanwhile, raises an army of Goths to sack Rome.

As Lucius makes his preparations, Titus ensnares Demetrius and Chiron (who Lavinia has identified as her attackers), slays them, and sets to making a pie from their remains. When Tamora and Saturnius arrive to try to convince Titus to call off Lucius and his Goths, Titus offers them a dinner, featuring pie as the main course. In the midst of the feasting, Titus slays Lavinia to relieve her misery, reveals the secret ingredient of his pie, then turns his sword on Tamora, slaying her. Saturnius slays Titus; in turn, Lucius slays Saturnius. Lucius is elected emperor of Rome. He orders Aaron buried up to his chest and left to starve, and orders the body of Tamora be left unburied for the scavengers.

TROILUS AND CRESSIDA

Troilus and Cressida begins with the Trojan War going on its seventh year. Troilus is King Priam's youngest son; Cressida is the daughter of Calchas, a priest of Troy. Cressida's uncle, Pandarus, encourages a romance that blossoms between the two. Meanwhile, the Greeks besieging Troy are bickering amongst themselves. The apathy in particular of Achilles toward the war is seen as damaging to the army's overall morale. When Hector issues a challenge to duel any Greek in one-on-one combat, Ulysses puts the fix in on a lottery so that Ajax is chosen; Ulysses hopes to spur the pride of Achilles by slighting him in the matter.

In the midst of this, Calchas deserts Troy for the Greek encampment. He proposes a simple barter; in exchange for telling what he knows of the Trojan forces, the Greeks will exchange a Trojan prisoner for his daughter, Cressida. Agamemnon, commander of the Greek army, agrees to this, and Cressida is soon parted from Troilus. However, Cressida seems less concerned about their separation when she meets—and flirts—with all the Greek generals. Trumpets blare, and Hector arrives to duel with Ajax. The two men battle each other to a standstill and eventually call a truce. The Trojan and Greek generals will dine together that evening at a feast.

Diomedes has been courting Cressida since her arrival in the Greek camp. While escorted by Ulysses, a heartbroken Troilus sees Cressida give Diomedes the sleeve that Troilus had given to her when she left Troy. He vows to kill Diomedes in battle, though their personal fight during the battle seems anticlimactic. During the battle, Hector slays Patroclus, which arouses the wrath of Achilles at last. Achilles encounters Hector, and—in all contempt of honor—has his men slay the warrior as he is unarmed and resting. Troy has suffered a grave defeat by the end of the day, and an enraged Troilus hurls curses at Achilles and Pandarus alike.