

# Introduction

The stories in this book are taken from plays written by William Shakespeare. They are set in different places hundreds of years ago.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Antonio is a merchant in the city of Venice in Italy. He is kind and generous and has many friends. His only enemy is a moneylender called Shylock. Antonio's life is in great danger. His friends must find a way to save him ...

In another story, which is set in Scotland, the main character is Macbeth, a nobleman. Under the influence of evil power, he wishes to be king. Because of his desire, many people have to suffer ...

From cold, dark Scotland we move to an island on the warm, blue Mediterranean Sea. Prospero, who knows magic, is waiting for his enemies who put him and his daughter Miranda on this island. What happens when they meet after twelve years?

We then go to the northern part of Europe. Hamlet is the Prince of Denmark. The ghost of Hamlet's father tells Hamlet to take revenge for him. Hamlet is a good, quiet, thoughtful man who does not like fighting. He has a hard time thinking what he should do.

Finally we come to England. Old King Lear asks his three daughters to say how much they love him, so that he can divide his kingdom among them accordingly. Do you think words can prove one's love?

These unusual and surprising stories by Shakespeare tell us about human nature, which has not changed throughout the centuries — how people can be both loving and generous, and cruel and selfish. Some of these stories are tragedies, which are very sad. The rest

are comedies, which have a happy ending. You will know which is which after reading them.

## About William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare lived in England over four hundred years ago. He was born in 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon. His family was poor and he did not go to university. But he studied hard in school when he was small. After he got married and had three children, he moved to London and spent most of his working life there. He died in 1616 (on his 52nd birthday).

Shakespeare is one of the world's greatest writers, and his plays are still enjoyed by millions of people. This is partly because of the wonderful stories they tell. He wrote a total of thirty-eight plays. He also wrote poetry, including many love sonnets. He had a great interest in human nature and all his plays are about this topic. His plays include comedies, romances, histories and tragedies.

Shakespeare spent most of his life writing plays for the theatre, most famously for the Globe Theatre. The Globe Theatre was built in 1598–99. The first recorded performance was of *Julius Caesar* in September 1599. Many of Shakespeare's plays were written for and performed at the Globe, which burnt down in 1613. It was rebuilt in 1614, only to be destroyed by fighting thirty years later. The new Globe Theatre was opened in 1997 about two hundred metres from the original site. It has lime-plastered walls and a thatched roof, just like the original.

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## The Merchant of Venice

### A good friend

In the days when the city of Venice was rich and famous, one of the chief citizens there was a merchant named Antonio. He was a very rich man. He owned many valuable ships and traded with many different foreign countries. He was well known for his kindness, and had many friends. Amongst them was a young Venetian nobleman called Bassanio. 5

Although he was a nobleman, Bassanio was quite poor. He often spent more money than he had so he could live the way he liked. But Antonio loved him, and always lent him money when he needed it. 10

Bassanio was in love with a wealthy and noble young lady named Portia, whose father had just died. Portia was not only wealthy, she was beautiful and clever, too. Princes and noblemen were continually asking her to marry them. These men were able to show their wealth and rank by arriving at her house with many servants, and giving her expensive presents. Bassanio didn't have enough money to do this. He was afraid Portia would not consider marrying him because he was so much poorer than all the others. 15 20

So one day, Bassanio went to his friend Antonio to ask for his help. He told Antonio that Portia seemed to like him. Bassanio thought that if only he could go to visit her dressed in the finest clothes, with lots of servants, and with some beautiful presents for Portia, he might be successful. If Antonio would lend him enough money, Portia might agree to marry him. 25