



**KENTUCKY  
SHAKESPEARE**

**IRA ALDRIDGE**

*Pioneer of the Stage*

**Study Guide**

**Grades 4th - 12th**

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## Kentucky Shakespeare

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Dear Educator,

Thank you for choosing Kentucky Shakespeare to enrich your students' lives with Art Education! We know that the arts are essential to a child's educational experience and development. It is our object to keep the arts alive and thriving in our schools and communities.

This comprehensive Study Guide includes background information on Ira Aldridge, his life and career, as well as essential information on William Shakespeare.

Please contact us with any questions or need for further assistance. Thank you for supporting the Commonwealth's largest in-school arts provider and the United States' oldest, free Shakespeare festival!

All Our Best to You,

Kyle Ware

Director of Education

Hannah Pruitt

Director of Creative Engagement

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## Academic Standards

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## Ira Aldridge: Pioneer of the Stage



Ira Frederick Aldridge was an African American actor born in New York City on July 24th, 1807. Although alive during a time of slavery in the U.S., Ira and his family were considered free men. As a child, he attended the African Free School and as a teen, he began acting at The American Grove Theatre - also known as The African Theatre.

In order to further pursue his theatrical passion without racial discrimination, he left America and immigrated to England. Although the actor was not fully free from racial persecution, he rose above it to share the stage with theatre legends like Edmund Kean.

In addition to his success in England, Ira Aldridge toured to several countries including Ireland, Austria, Poland, and Russia. He is renowned for his portrayals of Shakespeare's leading men in the plays *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, *Romeo & Juliet*, and most notably, as the first non-white actor to portray Othello onstage. He used the stage as his platform to speak out against slavery and support the abolitionist cause.

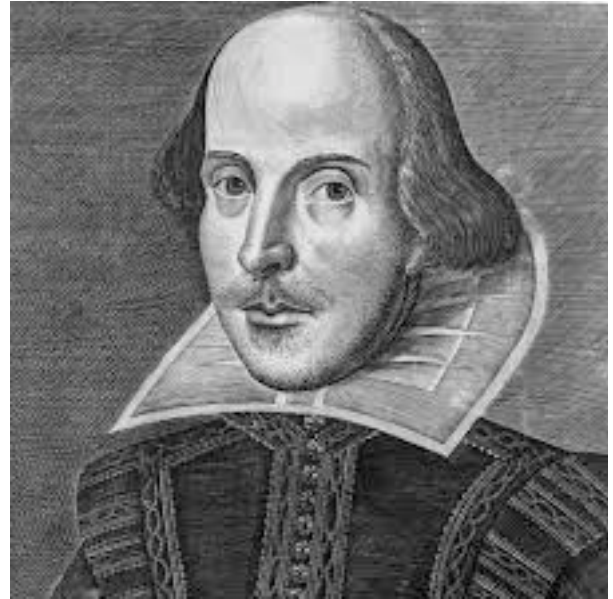
Ira Aldridge died August 6th, 1867 and has since received many honors commemorating his accomplished life in the theatre.

# William Shakespeare

(April 23, 1564 – April 23, 1616)

## His Life

- Born and raised in Stratford-upon-Avon
- Married Anne Hathaway at age 18 and had three children: Susanna and twins Hamnet and Judith
- Between 1585 and 1592, he began a successful career in London as an actor, writer, and part owner of the playing company the Lord Chamberlain's Men, later known as the King's Men
- Appears to have retired to Stratford around 1613, where he died three years later



*William Shakespeare*

## His Works

- An English poet and playwright
- Often called England's national poet and the "Bard of Avon" (or simply "The Bard")
- His surviving works consist 38 plays, 154 sonnets, two long narrative poems, and several poems
- His plays have been translated into every major living language and are performed more than those of any other playwright
- Produced most of his known work between 1590 and 1613
- His plays are often categorized into 3 genres: comedy, tragedy, and history
- In 1623, a few of his former theatrical colleagues published the First Folio, a collected edition of his dramatic works that included all but two of the plays now recognized as Shakespeare's
- Reputation did not rise to its present heights until the nineteenth century



*The Original Globe Theatre circa 1612*

## Examples of Words from Shakespeare's World

- Anon — soon
- Ere — before
- Hath — has
- Hence — away
- Naught — nothing
- Thee — you
- Thou — your
- Whence — where
- Wherefore — why



# Shakespeare's Three Styles of Plays

## Tragedy

Shakespearean tragedies were formulaic in style and used traditional conventions. These tenets included:

- A hero(ine) who seeks to avenge a crime committed against a family member or a personal injustice
- A tragic character whose own flaw leads to their downfall
- An end that contains a revelation of self-knowledge by the tragic hero about how his own frailty brought on his and others' downfall

*Antony and Cleopatra, Coriolanus, Hamlet, Julius Caesar, King Lear, Macbeth, Othello, Romeo & Juliet, Timon of Athens, Titus Andronicus*

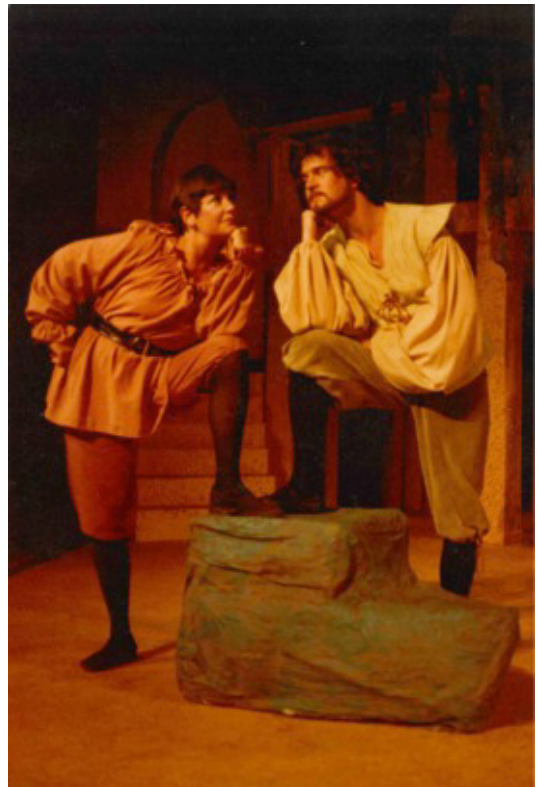


## Comedy

"Comedy" in its Elizabethan usage had a very different meaning from modern comedy. A Shakespearean comedy is one that has a happy ending, usually involving marriage, and a lighthearted tone and style. Shakespearean comedies tend to have:

- A struggle of young lovers to overcome a difficulty often presented by elders
- Separation and unification
- Mistaken identities
- A clever servant
- Heightened tensions, often within a family
- Multiple, intertwining plots
- Frequent use of puns

*All's Well That Ends Well, As You Like It, The Comedy of Errors, Cymbeline, Love's Labours Lost, Measure for Measure, The Merry Wives of Windsor, The Merchant of Venice, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Much Ado About Nothing, Pericles- Prince of Tyre, Taming of the Shrew, The Tempest, Troilus and Cressida, Twelfth Night, Two Gentleman of Verona, Winter's Tale*



## History

Shakespeare's "history" plays are based on the lives of English kings and brought massive audiences to the theatre. These plays are based only loosely on historical figures rather than actual events in history. The 10 plays that are categorized as histories cover English history from the twelfth to the sixteenth century particularly 1399-1485. The histories usually include elements of comedy and tragedy.

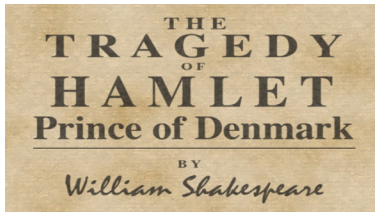
*King John, Richard II, Henry IV Parts I and II, Henry V, Henry VI Parts I, II and III, Richard III, Henry VIII*



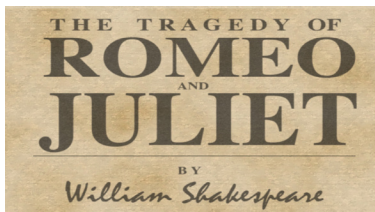
# Aldridge and Shakespeare:

## The plays of Ira Aldridge: Pioneer of the Stage

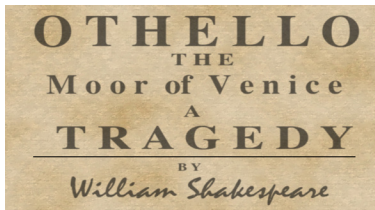
Throughout his storied career, Ira Aldridge played roles in Shakespeare's most well-known and significant plays. Ira Aldridge: Pioneer of the Stage visits some of these great works over the course of his story.



*The Tragedy of Hamlet: Prince of Denmark* is about a Prince named Hamlet who is visited by the ghost of his recently deceased father. The ghost tells Hamlet to avenge the murder caused by the newly elected King Claudius, who happens to be Hamlet's uncle. Unsure of committing murder himself and struggling to cope with his grief, Hamlet contemplates suicide. Eventually, he does murder the King right before he himself falls victim to a poisonous sword.



*The Tragedy of Romeo & Juliet* is about two teenagers in the town of Verona, Italy who fall madly in love against their parents' wishes. The Montagues and Capulets are locked in a bitter feud and the Prince has declared death on whoever starts the next violent quarrel. After Romeo and Juliet are married in secret, Romeo kills Juliet's cousin Tybalt and is banished from the kingdom. Through a series of miscommunications, the lovers commit suicide, shedding light on the needlessness of the families' feud.



*The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* is about an African general in the army who is deceived by his false friend Iago. Iago leads Othello to believe that Desdemona has committed adultery with Othello's lieutenant Cassio. The central object of confusion is a handkerchief that Iago steals and plants in Cassio's room. Driven mad by his jealousy, Othello ends up murdering his faithful wife Desdemona and, after he learns the truth, kills himself.



*The Merchant of Venice* is about a man named Antonio who loses his money when his ships sink at sea. He is in debt to a Jewish man named Shylock who is cruel and unflinching in his request to be paid. The matter is taken to court and Shylock demands one pound of Antonio's flesh. Shylock is then charged with attempted murder unless he agrees to drop his suit, which he



*The Tragedy of King Lear* is about an aging King who divides his kingdom between his three daughters. Because his youngest daughter Cordelia refuses to flatter her father with exaggerated love, King Lear rashly cuts her out of the inheritance. His other two daughters who have taken over the kingdom get entangled in a web of lies, adultery, and poison. King Lear, overcome with anger and grief, finds himself wailing at a storm and losing his mind. Eventually, Cordelia returns to rescue her ailing father but is arrested and hanged. King Lear realizes he has lost his kingdom and family and dies of a broken heart.

# IRA ALDRIDGE: PIONEER OF THE STAGE

## *CHRONOLOGY*

1564 - William Shakespeare is born in Stratford, England.

1603 - Shakespeare writes *Othello*.

1607 - Jamestown is colonized by the English, the first United States settlement.

1616 - William Shakespeare dies.

1619 - Slaves arrive in Jamestown.

1775 - American Revolutionary War begins.

1776 - Declaration of Independence issued to King George.

1783 - American Revolutionary War ends.

1807 - Ira Aldridge is born a freeman in New York City.

1818 - Ira Aldridge begins attending African Free School.

1820 - African Theatre opens. Ira Aldridge makes American stage debut as Romeo.

1824 - Ira Aldridge emigrates to Liverpool, England.

1825 - Ira Aldridge makes European stage debut.

1826 - Ira Aldridge plays *Othello*.

1831 - Ira Aldridge tours to Ireland.

1833 - Edmund Keane collapses on stage while playing *Othello*; Ira Aldridge takes over the role.

1852 - Ira Aldridge tours continental Europe.

1858 - Ira Aldridge tours Russia.

1863 - The Emancipation Proclamation

1865 - The 13th Amendment abolishes slavery in the United States.

1867 - Ira Aldridge dies in Poland at age 60.

1932 - Shakespeare Memorial Theatre opens. Ira Aldridge is honored with a bronze plaque, the only African American out of 33 recipients.

# ESSENTIAL THEATRE VOCABULARY

**Actor-** Individual who pretends to be a character in a play; who represents a character in a play.

**Characters-** The personalities or parts actors become in a play; roles played by actors in a play.

**Climax-** The point of highest dramatic tension or a major turning point in the action of a play.

**Conflict-** The opposition of persons, forces, or ideas that gives rise to the dramatic action.

**Costumes-** The clothing worn by the actors to play the characters.

**Empathy-** The capacity to relate to the feelings of another.

**Exposition-** The part of a play that introduces the theme, main characters and circumstances.

**Falling Action-** The action after the climax of the plot.

**Interpretation-** To explain or tell the meaning of something; to present in understandable terms.

**Monologue-** A speech made by a single character; often when a character is “thinking out loud.”

**Motivation-** An incentive or an inducement for further action for a character.

**Playwright-** The individual who writes a play.

**Plot-** What happens in a play; the order of events, the story as opposed to the theme; what happens rather than what it means.

**Resolution-** The solution to the problem after the climax in a play.

**Rising Action-** The portion of the play from the beginning to the climax, where the action increases in intensity and excitement.

**Role-** Part/ character/ person written by a playwright.

**Script-** The play in written form.

**Stage-** The area where the actors perform the play.

**Theme-** What the play means as opposed to what happens; the main idea or message within the play.

**Turning Point-** The moment in a play when events can go either way; the moment of decision; the crisis.



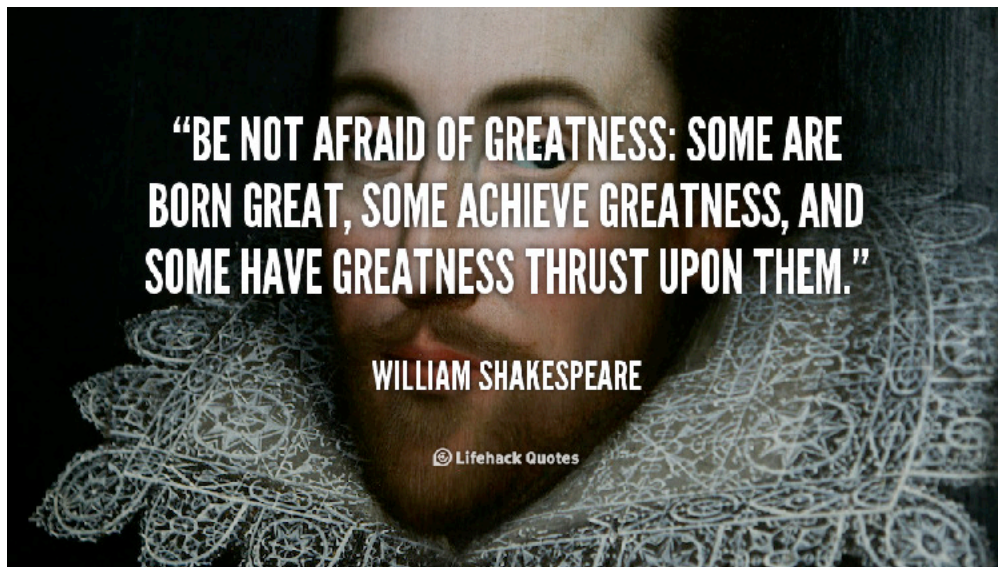
# Shakespeare Links & Resources

Type the word Shakespeare in a search engine and you will find a plethora of information on him, his works and his environment. Show your students that the internet can be a great way to research and gather valuable information - especially when you can't find it at your local library.

[www.absoluteshakespeare.com](http://www.absoluteshakespeare.com)  
*Comprehensive Resource of Works*

[www.folger.edu](http://www.folger.edu)  
*The Folger Shakespeare Library*

<https://penguinrandomhousesecondaryeducation.com/guides/>  
*The Penguin & Signet Classic's Teacher Guide*



## Classroom Challenge:

Write a letter to Kentucky Shakespeare. Describe what you liked about the performance and how it helped to see Shakespeare be performed rather than just reading it. Describe what you did, saw, and heard. What was your favorite part?

Mail to: Kentucky Shakespeare 616 Myrtle St. Louisville, KY 40208  
Email to: [education@kyshakespeare.com](mailto:education@kyshakespeare.com)