William Shakespeare, actor and playwright, wrote 36 plays in his career—perhaps even a few more that were lost to time. Some are comedies and mysterious “romances,” some are searing tragedies, others are complex stories dealing with characters from English history. Some—like “Hamlet” and “Romeo and Juliet”—are famous around the world. Others are obscure and rarely performed.

Of these, we can recommend about a third of them as appropriate for K-8 students, with some editing and adaptation—obviously, the younger the student, the more cutting and adaptation.

The other plays, however, are full of terrific scenes and characters and worthy of exploration as well. Your choice will depend on your goals for your project, the time you have available and the age and maturity of your students.

Once you get into Shakespeare, you’ll never run out of plays to read or perform. You’ll find an entire universe of words and worlds, characters and stories, all yours at the opening of a book or the click of a mouse. This is something children really love about Shakespeare— the sensation of a treasure box opening up, with all sorts of goodies in it, new characters, new stories, a trove that cannot be exhausted.

Only 19 of these plays were published in book form during his lifetime. We are lucky that two of William’s fellow performers from his acting company, John Hemmings and Henry Condell, collected all of Shakespeare’s works seven years after his death and printed them a big volume in 1623 in London titled, “Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies, Published according to the True Originall Copies.” You can see an actual surviving copy of this book—known as the First Folio—in the Harry Ransom Center collection on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin! (link here to HRC and image)

Most of these 36 plays, trimmed down appropriately, could provide a rich and challenging experience for a group of young performers. The more familiar you become with Shakespeare, the more you’ll be able to dig into them on your own and even do your own editing. At different times, different works will speak to you. But if you’re just now setting out on your Shakespearean journey, we can recommend some good places to start.

In the 1623 First Folio, the plays were divided into three categories—Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies. Over time editors added a fourth category, Romances, and put the later plays,
with their elements of the mystical and themes of forgiveness, under this heading.

When a student asks about the differences between these categories, we usually respond first that, “In a comedy, no one dies.” In a romance, someone might die during the play, but the ending is one of lyrical resolution and acceptance. The tragedies often end with several bodies on stage, including that of the protagonist, and the histories are epics usually centered on events during crisis and wartime.