In the original “Catalogue” of the First Folio, the plays now called Romances were split between the Tragedies (Cymbeline) and the Comedies (The Tempest, The Winter’s Tale), while Pericles was not included at all.

This fourth category was eventually created for these plays, because they never quite fit in those other spots; they contain dark events and, in some cases, deaths, but they end happily with some sort of reconciliation. All four of these plays also feature moments we would call mystical, with spirits, revelations, or magical transformations. Father-daughter relationships are central (as in Shakespeare’s own life, his biographers tell us, due partly to the untimely death of his young son Hamnet). And the happy endings, the marriages, have a different tone than in the comedies. As Shakespearean editor Alfred Harbage wrote: “In the comedies the perpetuation of life seems a merry business. In the romances it seems sacred.”

**The Tempest**

This play has perhaps the most dramatic opening scene in all of Shakespeare – a terrifying shipwreck in a howling storm. Beginning with this scene is a great way to get a group of students to work together, and to get them hooked into the fairy-tale-like story of the play. Next they will encounter a powerful magician stranded on a desert island, an airy spirit named Ariel, an earthy creature named Caliban, a bumbling butler named Stephano, a jumpy jester named Trinculo, a prince and a princess, a struggle between revenge and forgiveness – what a great combination!

We love working on this play because of the depth of the characters and the power of the poetry. Some of the most exquisite speeches Shakespeare ever wrote are in this play, and they can challenge children to really focus and listen. They also provide excellent opportunities for choral exploration of language (click here for more on ways to do this).

**The Winter's Tale**

We have seen a 4th/5th grade class do a beautiful performance of this play, but it is a tough one. The central story of the sudden jealousy of Leontes, the King of Sicilia, requires real commitment and intensity from the performers. The final statue scene is one of the greatest moments in all of Shakespeare, however, and well worth the struggle. This is a play to take your time on and really explore.

**Other romances**

Pericles and Cymbeline are both rich and fascinating, but deal with mature themes that make them “R-rated” in certain scenes. They are well worth the read: Pericles has a great shipwreck and an unforgettable reunion at the end, and Cymbeline contains one of the most poignant and haunting songs Shakespeare wrote, “Fear no more the heat o’ th’ sun.”