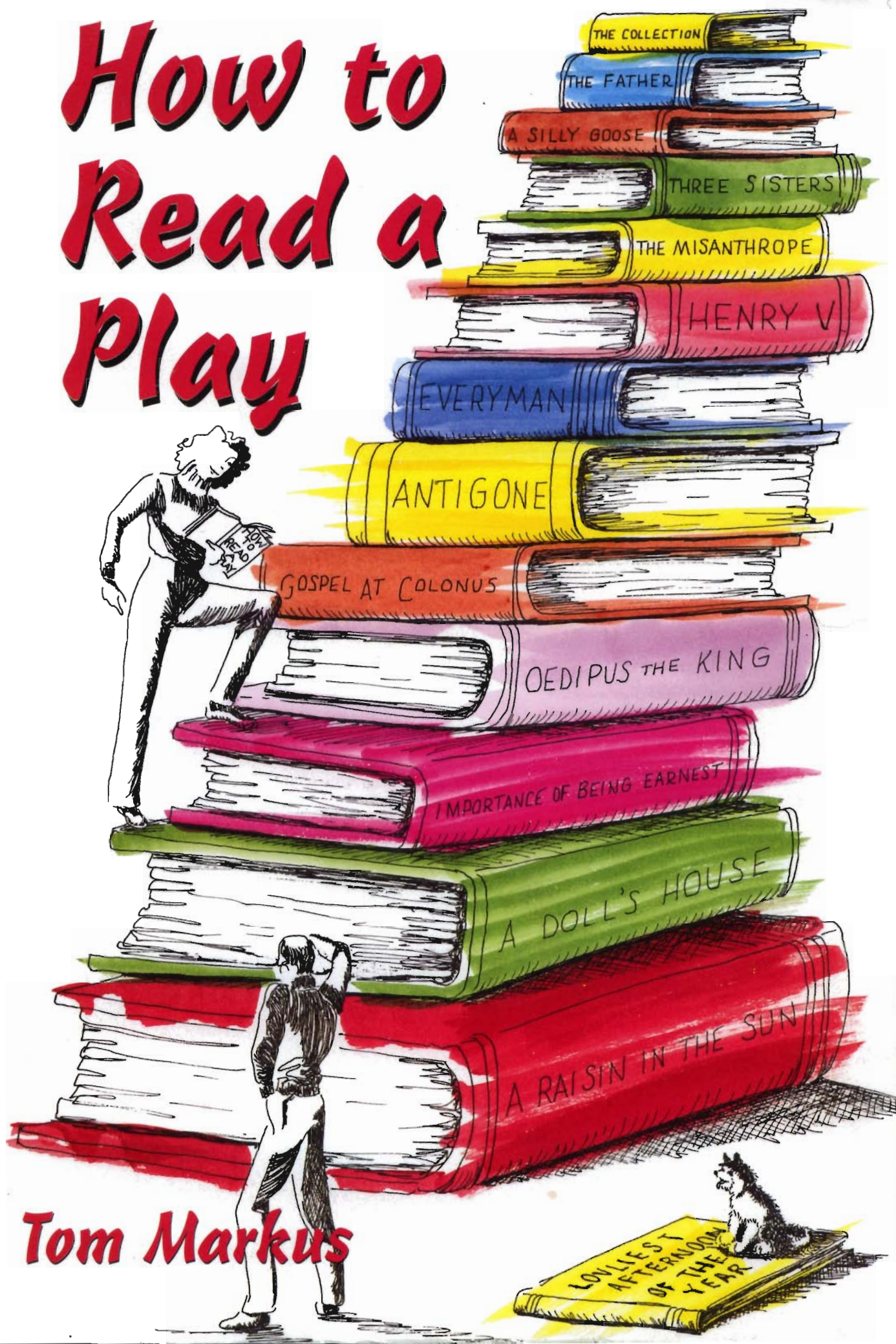


# How to Read a Play



Tom Markus

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**Original Illustrations by Linda Sarver**

The performances on the Elizabethan stage were accompanied by live music and elaborate backstage sound effects, as you will discover if you watch Olivier's film version of *Henry V*. The musicians probably played from their own special gallery or balcony, and their music announced the beginning of the performance, accompanied all the dances or songs (there aren't any songs in *Henry V*, but many of Shakespeare's comedies have spirited and lyrical songs in them), and may have provided underscoring to enhance the emotional feeling of some scenes. Additionally, a wide variety of sound effects were heard from backstage: the shaking of a piece of suspended flat metal to signify thunder (a "thunder sheet"), a wind machine for storm effects, canons to signify battles, and whistles to signify birds.

written them into a breezy novel that probably gives as truthful a telling of the essentials of Shakespeare's life as many drearier though more scholarly biographies.

There is a legend that one of Shakespeare's first jobs as an apprentice to the Lord Chamberlain's Men was to imitate the crowing of a rooster. This and other legends are included in a quick-reading novel called *Will Shakespeare* by John Mortimer, the author of the TV series *Rumpole of the Bailey*. Mortimer has taken the few known facts and the oft-repeated legends about Shakespeare's life and

The actors' costumes, for the most part, were standard Elizabethan clothes. The actors wore the same fashions that the audience was wearing. They did not concern themselves with historical accuracy, as we do today, and so the characters wore Elizabethan clothes even if they played characters who lived in ancient Athens or in England at the time of the real King Henry the Fifth, 175 years before the play was performed. When they played the roles of royalty, of churchmen, or of rich nobles, the actors dressed as elaborately and appropriately as possible, and much money was spent on costumes.\* The theatre companies welcomed gifts of used clothes from rich patrons, and on occasions they hired people to make special costumes. This was particularly necessary when a play had fantastical characters in it, like the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Sometimes, when they wanted to suggest a character from ancient times, they might put some partial costume over their Elizabethan clothing. The intent was not to create the illu-



The clothes we wear today are very different from those worn in Shakespeare's time.

\*In the opening scenes of Olivier's film, the actors wear ecclesiastical robes and the ornate dress of the court, and so seem more elegant than the people in the audience. but all the costumes are of the Elizabethan era.