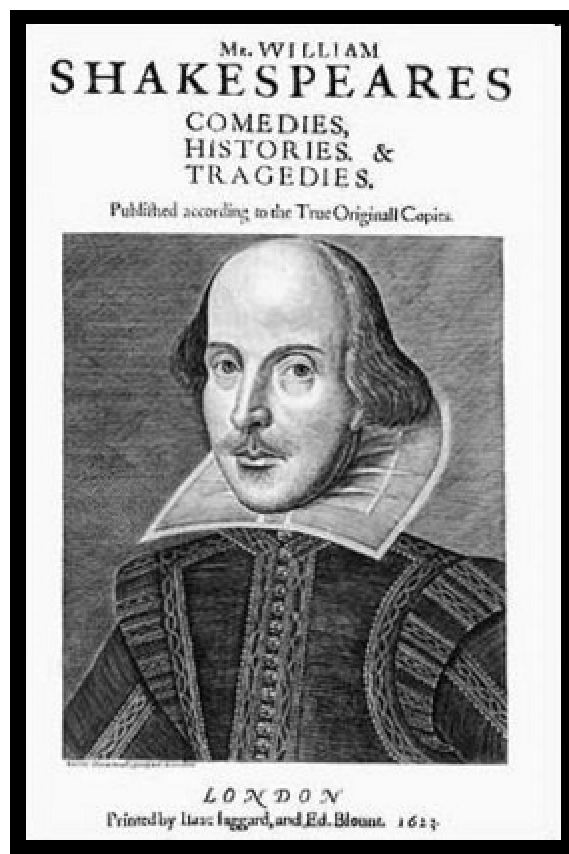


## Part VI

# Shakespeare and Modern English

AD 1611 – the present

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The surprising thing to most people is that Shakespeare is *modern* English.  
(Are they absolutely certain about that?)

## Shakespeare

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### Chapter 14

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts...

From *As You Like It*,

William Shakespeare

### **A Class By Himself**

There is no better introduction to William Shakespeare than Professor Elliot Engel's in his entertaining audio lecture entitled "How William Became Shakespeare."

When you talk about Shakespeare, you are talking about someone who enjoys a reputation that is different from every other human being who has ever picked up a pen and written in any country at any time. There is everybody else who writes, and then there is William Shakespeare. That cannot be said about any other writer that we study either in the history of the English language or in any other.

Professor Engel goes on to say that you will never see Shakespeare's name on a list of the "top ten writers in English," or the "five best authors in the English language," because Shakespeare is simply, and always, in a class by himself. He is never one of the best. He is the best. Period. And not only that, for Shakespeare, more often than any other author, is said to be the greatest writer of all time in *any* language.

### **Shakespeare's Inventions**

By Shakespeare's day English had finally reached complete respectability, but it had not yet become bound up in the trappings of too many grammar rules or

spelling rules or much of any rules yet for that matter. In *The Story of English*, the authors describe the remarkable freedom of Elizabethan English:

Almost any word could be used in almost any part of speech. Adverbs could be used for verbs, nouns for adjectives; nouns and adjectives could take the place of verbs and adverbs. In Elizabethan English you could happy your friend, malice or foot your enemy, or fall an axe on his neck.

No one used this freewheeling English more boldly and creatively than William Shakespeare. And not only did he use words creatively, he used an enormous amount of words. Researchers have found that Shakespeare employed an amazing 20,138 words in his works. (To give you an idea of how many that is, the King James Bible used a vocabulary of around just 8,000.) And of those 20,000 or so words, at least 1,700 were his own invention. A small sampling of the words Shakespeare spawned:

amazement	exposure	lonely
bedroom	fitful	road
bump	frugal	radiance
courtship	generous	sneak
critic	gloomy	submerge
dwindle	gnarled	useless
eventful	hurry	

Besides just plain new words, Shakespeare invented new phrases. His phrases have become so much a part of our daily speech that the story is often told of a high school student being forced to attend one of Shakespeare's plays and afterwards complaining that it was not very good because it was so full of overused expressions and clichés! Of course, the point is that when Shakespeare wrote these expressions, they were all brand new and fresh from his incomparable mind. Here's just a few:

civil tongue	cold comfort
eyesore	fancy free
foregone conclusion	laughing stock
love affair	snow white
tongue-tied	one fell swoop
in a pickle	more sinned against than sinning
your own flesh and blood	the milk of human kindness
heart of gold	all that glitters is not gold

won't budge an inch	be that as it may
as luck would have it	be-all and end-all
dead as a door-nail	it's Greek to me

And the list goes ever on! William Shakespeare had a monumental impact on our language. In fact, he was a kind of mini-invasion of the English language all by himself.

Along with his influence upon our vocabulary and turn of phrase, Shakespeare remains unparalleled in two other important aspects of his writing:

- (1) The extent of his over-all knowledge
- (2) His insight into human motivation.

### **The Extent of His Knowledge**

Shakespeare's plays demonstrate a vast array of knowledge on a truly enormous range of subjects. It is so vast, in fact, that it became the basis for various arguments (some of which still float around out there on the internet) that Shakespeare was not the true author of the works ascribed to him. The argument basically goes like this: "It is not possible that one man could have had the span of knowledge reflected in the plays ascribed to William Shakespeare. His plays show an understanding of botany, astronomy, law, medicine, geography, history, politics and literature to the extent that no one person could have written them, and certainly not a country-boy who just made it through grammar school! Why, it must have been a team of men who wrote them."

Though at times this argument has drawn attention from various scholars, mainstream thinking stands behind Shakespeare as being the author of the plays ascribed to him. However, the argument certainly serves as a powerful testimony to Shakespeare's genius! It also testifies to the surprising quality of Shakespeare's grammar school and the solid educational background it provided.

Elizabethan grammar schools were more rigorous than our own and the one Shakespeare attended was one of the best in his day. He went to the King Edward IV grammar school in Stratford on Avon (on the Avon River), a rural town not too far from London and the place where he grew up. English grammar schools of this period trained boys beginning at age seven up through age fourteen. The boys were kept busy with classical studies for eleven hours each day of summer and around nine hours in winter (due to decreasing daylight), for five and one-half days each week, and forty to forty-four weeks each year. This amounted to almost double the amount of time a modern child is in class (not a happy thought, is it?) Couple this

education with a brilliant mind, a razor-sharp memory, and a natural curiosity so that education continues well beyond the school years and you get...well, Shakespeare!

### **His Insight**

Up until the modern era teachers wanted good literature that encouraged good moral behavior in their students (what a concept). Shakespeare gave educators the best of both, great literature with a thoroughly moral base, and that's one reason teachers have been making their students study Shakespeare for the last 400 years. His themes, his characters, and his plots all emerge from an overall Christian worldview.

However, though Shakespeare writes from a Christian point of view, he is never simplistic. Like the Bible itself, which does not gloss over the sinfulness of even its finest heroes (such as David who committed both adultery and murder, but remains our hero), Shakespeare draws us into the lives of full and complex heroes and villains. We may pity the villain at times or see fatal flaws in the hero. Sometimes we identify with both. Shakespeare hides wisdom in the mouth of his fools at times, and a wise king may do foolish things. He uses his characters to illustrate that life may become absurd and fruitless, but it is only *after* that character has fallen to the "dark side." For instance, Macbeth speaks a very well known and often quoted soliloquy on the utter meaninglessness of life:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

*Macbeth Act 5, scene 5*

The view of life expressed here is certainly not Biblical. However, Macbeth reaches these powerfully haunting conclusions only *after* he has committed a heinous crime. Macbeth's willful act of murder has ushered his soul into a very dark

place, indeed, and his actions have distorted his thinking and his perceptions about life. Paul describes a similar process in Romans chapter 1 where he says wicked behavior leads to a darkened mind.

In the end, if you look at “the long and short of it” (to quote Shakespeare), Shakespeare consistently illustrates throughout all his works that sin leads to suffering and that life is imbued with purpose and meaning only when a person strives for what is right, honest, and good. Most Christians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries felt the two key books for any educated person to own were the King James Bible and the complete works of William Shakespeare. Is it any wonder?

There are many books on Shakespeare, his life, the period of history during which he lived, and the early theaters of London, especially the Globe Theater with which Shakespeare is most often identified. So read all you can about Shakespeare. But most of all, read Shakespeare. Watch the movies that have been produced from his plays. Go to his plays! No other medium brings Shakespeare’s works to life better than a troupe of players in live action before a responding audience. He was a playwright not a novelist; his works were meant to be *performed*. After all – and to quote Shakespeare— “The play’s the thing.”



*Love is not love*

*Which alters when it alteration finds*

*Or bends with the remover to remove.*

*O, no, it is an ever-fixèd mark*

*That looks on tempests and is never shaken...*

Sonnet 116

*“The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers.”*

Act IV, Scene II, King Henry the Sixth, Part II