

### Why study Shakespeare?

We often get asked why it is still important to study the work of William Shakespeare in the 21st century.

The American author Marchette Chute in the introduction to her book *Stories from Shakespeare* wrote:

"William Shakespeare was the most remarkable storyteller that the world has ever known. Homer told of adventure and men at war, Sophocles and Tolstoy told of tragedies and of people in trouble. Terence and Mark Twain told comic stories, Dickens told melodramatic ones, Plutarch told histories and Hans Christian Andersen told fairy tales. But Shakespeare told every kind of story - comedy, tragedy, history, melodrama, adventure, love stories and fairy tales - and each of them so well that they have become immortal. In all the words of storytelling, his is the greatest name."

Amanda Mabillard's Shakespeare Online website lists FOUR reasons:

- **Illumination of the Human Experience** - his ability to summarize the range of human emotions in simple yet profoundly eloquent verse
- **Great stories** - Shakespeare's stories transcend time and culture
- **Compelling Characters** - his truly great characters are unequalled in literature
- **Ability to turn a phrase** - many common expressions thought to be clichés were Shakespeare's creations.

As Bernard Levin once famously wrote:

"If you cannot understand my argument, and declare 'It's Greek to me', you are quoting Shakespeare; if you claim to be more sinned against than sinning, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you recall your salad days, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you act more in sorrow than in anger, if your wish is father to the thought, if your lost property has vanished into thin air, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you have ever refused to budge an inch or suffered from green-eyed jealousy, if you have played fast and loose, if you have been tongue-tied, a tower of strength, hoodwinked or in a pickle, if you have knitted your brows, made a virtue of necessity, insisted on fair play, slept not one wink, stood on ceremony, danced attendance (on your lord and master), laughed yourself into stitches, had short shrift, cold comfort or too much of a good thing, if you have seen better days or lived in a fool's paradise - why, be that as it may, the more fool you, for it is a foregone conclusion that you are (as good luck would have it) quoting Shakespeare; if you think it is early days and clear out bag and baggage, if you think it is high time and that that is the long and short of it, if you believe that the game is up and that truth will out even if it involves your own flesh and blood, if you lie low till the crack of doom because you suspect foul play, if you have your teeth set on edge (at one fell swoop) without rhyme or reason, then - to give the devil his due - if the truth were known (for surely you have a tongue in your head) you are quoting Shakespeare; even if you bid me good riddance and send me packing, if you wish I were dead as a door-nail, if you think I am an eyesore, a laughing stock, the devil incarnate, a stony-hearted villain, bloody-minded or a blinking idiot, then - by Jove! O Lord! Tut, tut! for goodness' sake! what the dickens! but me no buts - it is all one to me, for you are quoting Shakespeare."

## Shakespeare's Influence on Other Artists

Shakespeare influenced every generation of writers since his death and he continues to have an enormous impact on contemporary plays, movies, and poems. The Romantic poet John Keats (1795-1821) was so influenced by Shakespeare that he kept a bust of the Bard beside him while he wrote, hoping that Shakespeare would spark his creativity. Keats's poems duplicate Shakespeare's style and are full of Shakespearean imagery.

In a letter to Benjamin Robert Haydon, dated 10 May 1817, Keats writes:

I remember your saying that you had notions of a good Genius presiding over you. I have of late had the same thought - for things which I do half at Random are afterwards

confirmed by my judgment in a dozen features of Propriety. Is it too daring to fancy Shakespeare this Presider?

- It is interesting to note that George Bernard Shaw (1865-1950), who ridiculed those who worshipped Shakespeare (inventing an insulting term to denote the study of Shakespeare - *bardolatry*), secretly admired Shakespeare a great deal and often told his close friends that he thought the Bard had an unsurpassed command of the language.

In 1899, Sir Herbert Beerbohm-Tree produced *King John*, the first movie based on a play by Shakespeare, and since then there have been dozens of movies and adaptations loosely based on Shakespeare's work, including:

- *The Boys from Syracuse* (1940) - *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*
- *Joe Macbeth* (1953) - *Macbeth*
- *Kiss Me Kate* (1953) - *The Taming of the Shrew*
- *Forbidden Planet* (1956) - *The Tempest*
- *Throne of Blood* (1957) - *Macbeth*
- *West Side Story* (1961) - *Romeo and Juliet*
- *Chimes at Midnight* (1967) - various plays
- *Ran* (1985) - *King Lear*
- *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) - *1 Henry IV*
- *A Thousand Acres* (1997) - *King Lear*
- *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999) - *The Taming of the Shrew*
- *Scotland, Pa.* (2001) - *Macbeth*
- *O* (2001) - *Othello*

The English group Mumford & Sons, nominated this year for two Grammy awards, borrowed the title of their debut album, *Sigh No More* from Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*.

# How Shakespeare Saw the World

The world of William Shakespeare was much smaller than the one in which we live today. The parameters of how a person could behave and what a person could believe in were limited. Religious and personal freedoms which we consider so important today were unknown to the people of Shakespeare's England. To fully appreciate a play by Shakespeare, it is helpful to understand how he and his fellow citizens viewed the world.

They saw the world as a huge morality play written, staged, and directed by God. In this play there were only good and evil, with nothing in between. Everything happened so there would be a balance between good and evil. If the king or queen was cruel and tyrannical, or if a family was struck by a devastating illness or misfortune, it was a sign that God was punishing them. Going against what was taught to be God's will would certainly lead to severe punishment in life and hell after death. There was no mistaking right and wrong. They were taught in the lessons of the church.

God was ruler of everything and everyone. Events occurred according to what he wanted. There were no accidents. The church and its leaders were representatives of God on earth, and the king was king because God intended him to be. Everyone else existed at lower social levels, with noblemen and churchmen above the common people. Queen Elizabeth held the authority which otherwise would have gone to a king.

Children had no rights except those allowed by their parents. Teenagers had to obey every wish of their parents until they married, and marriage was usually arranged by the parents with little concern for the child's desires. Children married young, often by 14 or 15. A wife was obliged to obey her husband, just as she had obeyed her father. A father had the God-given right to force his daughter to marry a man she did not love. If she refused, he could send her to a convent (or perhaps worse) for the rest of her life, and she could do nothing about it.

The earth was the center of the universe with God and church in charge. God had made the king the center of the country. A father was the center of his home, and the "king" of his own castle-home. Everyone was obliged to obey this order. There were severe social and political penalties for anyone daring to go against it.