

## SHAKESPEARE'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

William Shakespeare is widely regarded as the greatest writer of the English language. Prior to Shakespeare and even during his time, English grammar and the rules of the English language were not fixed. But, once Shakespeare's plays became popular in the late seventeenth and eighteenth century, they helped contribute to the standardization of the English language. This was rendered possible particularly through such projects as Samuel Johnson's 'A Dictionary of the English Language' which quoted Shakespeare more than any other writer. Scores of Shakespearean words and phrases became embedded in the English language. Shakespeare expanded the scope of English literature by introducing new words and phrases, experimenting with blank verse, and also by introducing new poetic and grammatical structures.

The first thing that strikes one about Shakespeare's English is that he used many words to mean something else than what they mean to us today. For example, the word 'fantastical' in Shakespeare's plays meant something more along the lines of 'imagined'. This word has positive connotations today, and couldn't be used to describe a murder, unlike '...My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical...' (1.3.138, 'Macbeth').

Shakespeare might have wanted to create language to fit his iambic pentameter style of writing. One way he did this was with 'what say you' and 'what do you say.' (Twelfth Night, 4.2.89; 4.3.31) One has an extra syllable, but both have the same meaning. Another device that he also used was making contractions. Ne'er instead of never, o'er instead of over, are examples of such contractions. It could have easily been a way for Shakespeare to fix up a line and give it the right rhythm and length.

However, the main reason why Shakespeare coined so many new words was to reach a broad audience. His viewers ranged from peasants to royalty. The variations of language that he put forth encompassed many different social classes. He created his characters through the language. He could turn a character into someone vulgar simply through their vocabulary. One such vulgar word was 'now-a-days' used by the grave-digger in 'Hamlet'. Although this is not one of his additions to the English language, it is still a prime example of how he used vocabulary, both in use at the time and new words that he coined, to shape his characters.

Shakespeare's words came largely from manipulation of the current language. He was able to switch words from one part of speech to another part. He turned adjectives into adverbs. He made adjectives into nouns. For example, '...a sudden pale...usurps her cheek...' ('Venus and Adonis'). Other examples are '...say what you can, my false o'erweighs your true...' ('Measure for Measure', 2.4.1283). He made adjectives and nouns into verbs. For example, '...which happies those that pay the willing loan...' (Sonnet IV, line 6.) And, lastly, he made verbs into nouns. An example is '...recounts what horrid sights seen by the watch...' ('Julius Caesar', 2.2.16.) The 'watch' here is used to mean watchmen.

The whole personality of Shakespeare and his varied experiences of life shaped his powerful language. In his writing, we can discern that he was not very enthusiastic about the school systems at the time. His general references to education tell us about that. Instead, he found 'tongues in trees, books in the running brooks.' ('As You Like It', 2.1.18) As a boy, he was more interested in nature. It is probable that he worked as a lawyer's clerk or a page, because he was very well acquainted with courtly speech. He may also have worked as a schoolmaster himself, which could explain his use of Latin to create new words, his knowledge of other languages, and his amazing rhetoric.

Shakespeare was a master not only of words, but of the language itself. His influence on the English language is monumental and he will always remain as an iconic literary figure of all time.