

The Extent of Shakespeare's Influence on the Phraseology of English

The impact of Shakespeare's works is one of the most important influences on the development of English during the final decades of the renaissance period. (Crystal. 2003:62)

He is credited for his creativity with the language at the time, and also for introducing over 3000 words into the Oxford English dictionary, and which filtered into our main stream language, still used to this day. (Chubarov. 2011)

Considering the works of Shakespeare to be contemporary is the evidence of his language inventions still being present in speech today. Contemporary is the relationship between the Elizabethan time, and our time. One on the stage and the other off it. One is the time inhabited by the actors, the other being the time inhabited by his audiences. (Elsom. 1995:12)

Shakespeare is probably the most worldwide known of all Englishmen. He is famous for the impact he had upon the development of the Early Modern English language. This influence has been strong enough to survive into our everyday speech and is still used frequently in the modern day. (Shay. 2007) The English language is full of words and phrases invented by Shakespeare. He was able to do this during his time (towards the end of the renaissance period) because English was changing as people modernized it in their normal workaday speech.

William Shakespeare wrote and performed his plays during the Early Modern English period of 1590-1612, also known as the Renaissance period. This era was a major turning point in the development of the English Language. In the decades leading up to 1600, the English Language was to be re-born. English was on the move due to a number of social and political factors.

"Renaissance" means "rebirth." It refers especially to the rebirth of learning that began in Italy in the fourteenth century and eventually spread to the north, one of which was England, by the sixteenth century. (Plumb. 2001) It also ended in the north in the mid-seventeenth century (earlier in Italy). During this period, there was a massive renewal of interest in and study of classical antiquity.

Yet the Renaissance was more than a "rebirth." It was also an age of new discoveries, both geographical exploration of the New World and colonization, and educational. Both kinds of discovery resulted in great changes upon the Western way of life. In religion, Martin Luther (1483-1546) challenged and eventually caused the division of one of the major institutions that had united Europe throughout the middle Ages, which is the Church. Renaissance thinkers thought themselves to be "voyaging into in the modern age", as distinct from the ancient and medieval eras. (Black. 2009)

A large stepping stone for English during this time was the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation was the religious and political development in the early 16th century. It was led by Martin Luther, a monk from Germany. The main problem was that the Roman Catholic Church was corrupt and that it should be changed to reach out to a wider selection of people. Luther also argued that a reformation was needed of other things. This also led to the issue of the language of the Bible, as a lot of people at that time couldn't read Latin. (Pettegree. 2011)

As a result of this, the church was changed and reformed, so that it was less greedy, fairer and accessible to a wider range of people and not just the rich and well educated.

Therefore, in 1558 Queen Elizabeth took to the throne after a five year period in which Catholicism had been re-established in England. Due to the controversy this caused, it would be well into the last two decades of Elizabeth's long reign before it could be said with confidence that Protestantism was the religion of the majority in England.

In accordance to Shakespeare, his plays were performed after these social and political factors, therefore his thirst and enthusiasm for English had a unique opportunity to flourish and grow.

As the language began to change, the grammar began to change also. One of the ways in which it was changing was that inflectional endings (suffixes that indicated the word's grammatical functions in the way that many modern languages still have) had mostly disappeared. Modern English was becoming more and more flexible and that was the background to the Renaissance explosion of the inventive language which is evident in the poetry studied at that period.

Another contributing factor to the evolving language was the great influence of other European vocabulary into the language as a result of the "cross pollination" in which the divided countries of Europe were coming into contact with one another (Bucholoz, Key. 2009). When Shakespeare was writing his plays, the language was rapidly absorbing words from other languages because of many contributing factors, such as wars, diplomacy, and colonization. At the age of Elizabeth, English was becoming more widely used with the evolution of philosophy, theology and physical sciences. Many writers in this era did not have the vocabulary to express such ideas. William Shakespeare expressed new ideas and Language play, by inventing, borrowing or adopting a word or a phrase from another language, known as *neologising*. This allowed new variations for English words. This also meant that whilst Shakespeare was writing, he had endless possibilities to be as creative as he liked.

Writers such as Shakespeare at the time were able to invent new functions for words with for the first time ever, have great freedom in contrast to the strict French and Latin rules that were in place before them. For example, in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* we can see the phraseology being used in different ways: '*The wild disguise has almost anticked us all.*' (Bate, Rasmussen. 2007), with the "antic" referring to a fool, which is know as a noun. However to his Elizabethan audience, Shakespeare turns it into a verb 'to make a fool of', which is still widely familiar in 2011.

This is evidence to suggest English was being set free to go where the playwright wanted to take it in his writing. Shakespeare takes it where he likes throughout his texts, transforming the English language, the birth of the modern usage of language the way we use it today. Modern English is still changing and developing, due to ever changing popular culture and fashion, and advances in technology, it is all playing a vital role in that as we pick up and uses new phrases, borrow foreign words, and mixing other dialects into our speech.

In *Love's Labour's Lost* he is able to exploit multiple meanings of one word to create a sentence like 'Light, seeking light, doth light of light beguile. "*Intellect,*" "*wisdom,*" "*eyesight*" and "*daylight*". (Bate, Rasmussen. 2007)

This nowadays we can relate to the concept of light as being intelligent, religious, and have seasonal connotations. These different relations of one word are what Shakespeare introduced.

Shakespeare also "coined" words together to create the popular phrases in English today. "It is generally believed that the basic elements of a language's vocabulary were created by coining in its earliest stages of development." (Shay. 2007: 109)

These included: "*flesh and blood*", "*cruel to be kind*", "*vanish into thin air*", "*the game is up*" and "*tower of strength*." (Bate, Rasmussen. 2007)

These are only a handful of examples compared to the many more Shakespeare created, emphasizing the vast extent his impact had upon the phraseology in the vocabulary of English.

One of the strongest pieces of evidence to prove the inventiveness of Shakespeare is his vocabulary at the time. Over four hundred years ago, Shakespeare had a vocabulary of at least twenty one thousand different words. Some have estimated (Hart. 1943) that with the combination of words, this could have reached thirty thousand. Comparisons are even touching the King James Bible of 1611, which used about ten thousand different words. The average educated man today, more than four hundred years after Shakespeare's time and also the advantage of the hundreds and thousands of new words that have come in since his time, has a working vocabulary of less than half that of Shakespeare. (Bragg. 2003:145)

What is also interesting about Shakespeare's attitude to his creativity at the time, is how he claimed himself as "A man on fire for new words" This association between fire and words is evident in one of his works Henry vi: (Bragg. 2003: 144)

"O! for a muse of fire, that would ascend

The brightest heaven of invention" (Bate, Rasmussen. 2007)

Therefore the English language would not be the same if it were not for Shakespeare. He invented over 1700 of our common words by re-arranging nouns into verbs, verbs into adjectives, connecting words never before used together, adding prefixes and suffixes, and creating words completely original. Therefore, it can be assumed he invented his own version of the language to entice and amaze his audiences. (Mabillard. 2000)

Here are a few examples of famous phrases coined by Shakespeare,

"star crossed lovers" - *Romeo and Juliet*,

"sound and fury" - *Macbeth*

"salad days" - *Anthony and Cleopatra*

"neither a borrower nor a lender be" - *Hamlet*

"brave new world" - *The Tempest*

"a foregone conclusion" - *Othello*

"a laughing stock" - *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

"a sorry sight" - *Macbeth*

"all corners of the world" - *Cymbeline*

"all's well that ends well" - *All's Well That Ends Well* (Shay. 2007:46)

Other famous classical writers of the period, such as Ben Jonson commented upon his genius, and his influence upon the language, and how a playwright that lived hundreds of years ago still exists in everyday speech and overall attitudes to

life and society. Jonson's attitude to Shakespeare is evident in some of his poetry. "To the memory of my beloved, the author, Mr. William Shakespeare: And what he hath left us," is highly credited in expressing the traditional view of Shakespeare as a poet who had a natural genius. The representations in the poem, suggests that his passion for language and genius was not subject to any rules except those of the audiences for which he wrote. But the poem itself qualifies this view (Bentley. 1945)

"Yet must I not give Nature all: Thy Art,

My gentle Shakespeare must enjoy a part."

However one of the most famous quotations taken from Jonson was "He was not of an age, but for all time."

These words are about Shakespeare. The quotation comes from Jonson's poem, *To the memory of my beloved*, found in the First Folio of Shakespeare's works, published in 1623. (Bate, Rasmussen. 2007)

It is clear from the evidence that the work of Shakespeare probably had the biggest impact upon the phraseology and introduction of a priceless amount of words that have had the audacity to survive into the modern day. Not just the genius of the playwright allowed him to create such a great historical influence, but the times and era in which he wrote his plays allowed the flexibility and creativity that he was so passionate to show the world. His neologisms and phrases are said by all on a day to day basis, for all genres, humour, and seriousness, and also, when there is simply nothing else to say one might express: "all's well that ends well."

List of References

Bate, J. Rasmussen, E (2007). *The complete works of William Shakespeare*. 4th ed. London: Wordsworth Editions.

Bragg, M (2003). *The Adventure of English*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Black, M. (2009). A guide to the Study of Literature. *A companion text for core studies 6, Landmarks of Literature*.

Bucholoz, R. Key, N (2009). *Early Modern England (1485-1714): A narrative history*. 2nd ed. London: Wiley-Blackwell.

Chubarov, A. (-). *The command of Shakespeare* . Available: http://1066andallthat.com/english_modern/shakespeare_english_01.asp. Last accessed 23rd February 2011.

Crystal, D (2004). *The stories of English*. London: Penguin Books.

Elsom, J (1989). *Is Shakespeare still our Contemporary?* London: Routledge. 12-16

Hart, A. (1943). The Growth of Shakespeare's vocabulary. *The Review of English Journals: Oxford Journals*. 2 (2), 242-254.

Pettegree, A. (2011). *BBC History: The English Reformation*. Available: http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/tudors/english_reformation_01.shtml. Last accessed 1st March 2011.

Plumb, J (2001). *The Italian Renaissance* . London: Mariner Books.

Mabillard, A. (2000). *Words Shakespeare invented* . Available: <http://www.Shakespeare-online.com/biography/wordsinvented.html7>. Last accessed 3rd February 2011.

Shay, S (2007). *The History of English* . London: Wardja Press. 34-46.