



William Shakespeare's birth as well as death anniversary was observed yesterday, 23 April. Born in 1564, he went on to make unprecedented contributions to English literature and, by extension, literature across the globe. He lived a full life before calling it a day in 1616.

We celebrate the Bard this morning.

— Literary Editor

Writers who borrowed from Shakespeare

MD. SHAFIQU L ISLAM

CHARLES Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Somerset Maugham, Tom Stoppard, John Steinbeck, Aldous Huxley, William Faulkner, Pearl S. Buck, Agatha Christie and many other famous writers have used phrases from Shakespeare as titles for their works. Many writers throughout the world have been greatly influenced by the works of Shakespeare, and as a result, they have quoted him, particularly in the titles they have chosen. "I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men" --- Falstaff's comment is a clue to knowing that Shakespeare's wit inspired others to write and the titles derived from his works reemphasize his greatness over all other writers.

Our purpose here is to quote the great lines by Shakespeare for pleasure and add some more pleasure in showing that a phrase or two from these lines have been titles for other works by other great writers. The lines quoted here are worth reading because they are famous lines from Shakespeare. To begin with, we read the following lines from *As You Like It*:

"Under the green wood tree / Who loves to lie with me / And turn his merry note / Unto the sweet bird's throat."

Thomas Hardy, a poet and novelist, chose *Under the Greenwood Tree* as the title for one of his great novels.

Hamlet has a host of friends, some of whom turn out to be his enemies and conspire with Claudius to eliminate him. Two of his school fellows, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whom he compares with adders, accompany him to England with a letter from Claudius requesting that Hamlet be killed. Hamlet could foresee the conspiracy and was able to save himself and get his untrustworthy friends killed. An ambassador from England tells the audience: "The ears are senseless that should give us hearing / To tell him his commandment is fulfilled / That Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead."

Tom Stoppard has directly borrowed both the title and theme of his play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* from the lines quoted above.

Twice Told Tales was used as a title by at least two major authors, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Charles Dickens. Life's exquisite definition in King John rings in the ears, "Life is as tedious as a twice told tale / Vexing the dull air of a drowsy man".

Aldous Huxley derived the title of his science fiction *Brave New World* from the humanistic lines uttered by Miranda to Ferdinand and his companions in *The Tempest*: "O, wonder! / How many goodly creatures are there here! / How beautiful mankind is! O brave new world / That hath such people in it." It is pertinent to mention here that

Huxley's novel of futurism does not portray human beings as "the paragon of animals".

The *Good Earth* writer Pearl S Buck named her collected works *Words of Love*, with inspiration from the saddest tragedy King Lear. The lines read: "And your large speeches may your deeds approve / That good effects may spring from words of love".

That "Frailty, thy name is woman" is a derivative comment uttered by Hamlet reminds us of the lines in *As You Like It*: "I must comfort the weaker vessel, as doublet and hose ought to show itself coura-



geous to petticoat." By the word of God wives are referred to as weaker vessels derived from the Holy Bible. Historian Antonia Fraser, drawing her title from Shakespeare, gives a description of 17th century womanhood of England in her book, *Weaker Vessel*.

John Steinbeck drew the title of his novel *The Winter of Our Discontent* from the famous soliloquy of Richard III. The lines read: "Now is the winter of our discontent / Made glorious summer by this son of York." The novel is an exposition of the moral degeneration of American culture. The title of another novel, *The Moon is Down*, by Steinbeck is drawn from Macbeth's words, "The moon is down, I have not heard the clock".

Somerset Maugham drew more than one title from Shakespeare. His novel *Cakes and Ale* is derived from the coaxing remark by Sir Toby Belch to the gullible Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*: "Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous / There shall be no more cakes and ale". Another of his novels, *The Razor's Edge*, drew its title from lines

of *Love's Labour's Lost*. The lines are "The tongues of mocking wenches are as keen / As is the razor's edge invisible / Cutting a smaller hair than may be seen / Above the sense of sense."

One of the most famous definitions of life is here the soliloquy of Macbeth: "It is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing."

The title of William Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury* is taken from the quote above.

A *Midsummer Night's Dream* is a romance and it is immortal for its great character Nick Bottom. John Updike wrote his fiction, *Bottom's Dream*, based on the line, "I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream; it shall be called Bottom's dream, because it hath no bottom."

Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* is one of the most famous love tragedies of all time. So many of its dialogues are recited for their "infinite variety", a reference to Cleopatra herself. In a scene where Antony and Cleopatra are present, the latter says, "I'll set a bourn how far to be beloved." Antony's reply is witty: "Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth." It was to give rise to Joyce Carol Oates' *New Heaven, New Earth*.

Shakespeare's impeccable Sonnet 130 is behind the title of Anthony Burgess' novel *Nothing Like the Sun*. Reading the lines connected to this is refreshing to us all: "My mistress's eyes are nothing like the sun / Coral is far more red than her lips' red / If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun / If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head."

Dorothy Parker's collected poems, *Not So Deep As A Well*, have had their genesis in the lines which throw light on the perennial philosophic quest of how much land a man needs for his burial. To be more specific, the lines quoted here from *Romeo and Juliet* gives the answer, "'Tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door; but 'tis enough, 't will serve."

All credit goes to the fantastic lines written by Shakespeare. Major writers who have borrowed the titles of their works from Shakespeare are heavily indebted to him because they, with all their creativity, reposed more trust in Shakespeare than in themselves by not trying to devise titles of their own.

Hamlet succinctly portrays the character of his murderous uncle Claudius: "My tables -- meet it is I set it down / That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain." Rex Stout draws the title of his fiction *And Be a Villain*, combining in it both mystery and detective.

Shakespeare can be read again and again to comprehend fully the meaning of every word. How his words or phrases can jolt one's mind is best expressed by all these titles we have been dwelling on.

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Shakespeare was for all time

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WILLIAM Shakespeare is the most famous English dramatist and poet. His contemporary and rival playwright Ben Jonson wrote about him thus: "He was not of an age, but for all time." Stephen Greenblatt, the editor of *The Norton Shakespeare*, writes, "Indeed, so absolute is Shakespeare's achievement that he has himself come to seem like great creating nature: the common bond of humankind."

Shakespeare's life is split into the regimes of two monarchs: Queen Elizabeth I (Elizabeth Tudor: 1533-1603; reign: 1558-1603) and King James I (James Charles Stuart: 1566-1625; reign: 1603-1625). James I (also James VI of Scotland) was the grandson on his mother's side of Elizabeth's father Henry VIII's sister Margaret. James's mother Mary, Queen of Scots, was executed by Elizabeth on the charge of sedition in 1587.

During Elizabeth's reign England expanded its trade and commerce to the Americas and the Far East. John Hawkins, Sir Francis Drake, Sir Walter Raleigh and Richard Hakluyt --- all these navigators-cum-adventurers were plundering at sea and were helping the English coffers to increase. It is now known that though the English parliament passed a law against plundering or piracy, Elizabeth herself invested money in the plundering voyages of John Hawkins.

Elizabeth died unmarried, and her successor King James I was a thorough scholar. He once said that he spoke Latin before he learnt his native tongue Scottish. He wrote a 120-page book titled *Basilicon Doron* (1599) in which he explained his ideas about the ideal king. The book was a bestseller, though James' permanent contribution to the English civilization is his instrumentalizing the publication of an authorized English translation of the Bible in 1611. It is known as the King James Bible.

In 1564, the year of Shakespeare's birth, the population of England was approximately 3.06 million, and by 1600 it had increased to 4.06 million, and by 1616, the year of Shakespeare's death, to 4.51 million. In 1600, the population of the city of London was 200,000. Every year about 10,000 people migrated to London.

Shakespeare's actual date of birth is conjectured to be 23 April 1564 on the basis of the record of his baptism which took place in the Holy Trinity Church of Stratford on 26 April. 1564 was a plague-ridden year, and in Stratford alone 254 people out of 800 died that year.

Shakespeare's grandfather Richard Shakespeare was a farmer in a village called Snitterfield near Stratford-upon-Avon. He was a tenant of a rich man called Robert Arden, whose daughter Mary Arden would marry John Shakespeare, the father of the poet.

Stratford was a scenic small town with open fields and rivers, which, in 1570, William Camden, a historian and Ben Jonson's teacher, called a "handsome small market town." In the year of Shakespeare's birth there were in Stratford 400 houses, all made of timber, and forty ash trees.

John Shakespeare was a glover (one that makes and sells gloves), a whittawer (a curer and whittener of skins), a wool-dealer, a landowner and a money-lender, though usury was illegal in England at that time. He also involved himself in the affairs of the

town and in 1568 was elected bailiff, the town's highest post. He also became an alderman, and in conformity with his status he wore a big ring on his thumb, which might have caught Shakespeare's fancy as a child. In Henry IV Part I, Shakespeare makes his famous comic character Falstaff jokingly say to the Prince (future Henry V) that he was so lean as a youth that he could easily sneak through an alderman's ring: "When I was about thy years, Hal, . . . I could have crept into any alderman's thumb-ring" (2.5.332-334).

Because of his over speculative habit, John Shakespeare soon ran into debts and his fortunes declined. Shakespeare may have reflected upon his father's condition when he made Polonius in Hamlet utter this famous line to his son Laertes: "Neither a borrower nor a lender be" (1.3.75).

He lost his membership in the city council because of his frequent absences. It was given to believe that he had absented himself for fear of being arrested for unpaid loans, but another speculation is that John had feared the repercussions for retaining his Catholic faith. England had turned to the Protestant faith since the time of Henry VIII. But Elizabeth's elder sister Queen Mary (1553-1558) revived the Catholic faith during her reign. But



Stratford-upon-Avon

Shakespeare was a Protestant.

John Shakespeare lived at Henley Street, in a house now known as The Birthplace. John and Mary had eight children four daughters and four sons of which William was the third child and eldest son. Though his brothers were harder, none of them outlived Shakespeare. His youngest brother Edmund, born sixteen years after him, also took to the stage but died at the age of twenty-eight in 1607. Shakespeare by that time was a highly successful playwright in London and provided an expensive feast at his brother's funeral ceremony. Shakespeare may also have paid for realizing his father's dream to promote himself to the gentry. John Shakespeare finally got entitled to the coat of arms, which was a prestigious mark inscribed on a shield in 1596, five years before his death.

Shakespeare married at eighteen, in November 1582, and his wife Anne Hathaway, who came from a nearby village called Shottery, was twenty-six years old at the time. The reason for this hasty marriage on Shakespeare's part could have been that Anne had become pregnant by him as their first daughter, Susanna, was baptized on 26 May 1583. Shakespeare then became the father of twins Hamnet and Judith in 1585. Hamnet, echoing

Hamlet, the character he would create fifteen years later, died at the age of eleven. It might have worried Shakespeare that he, a considerably rich man of the time, should have died without a male heir. So in Macbeth, we find Macbeth urging Lady Macbeth to "bring forth man-children only."

Shakespeare's father died in 1601 and his mother in 1608. Both parents had the opportunity to see their eldest son achieve name and fame. He bought them the second largest house in Stratford. The name of this new house was New Place. Shakespeare's wife, Anne died in 1623, the year Shakespeare's two friends from the theatre, Heminges and Condell, published the first folio edition of his plays, popularly known as F1623.

Susanna, Shakespeare's favourite daughter, was married to a successful physician, John Hall, in 1607. Their daughter Elizabeth, the poet's first grandchild was first married to Thomas Nash, and then after his death, to John (later Sir John) Bernard, and she died childless. His younger daughter Judith was married to Thomas Quiney, a vintner, in February 1616. But six weeks after the marriage, in March, it was discovered that a woman by the name of Margaret Wheeler, who died at childbirth, had been impregnated by Quiney. It upset Shakespeare much, and he radically revised his will bequeathing most of his property, including the New Place, to Susanna. Susanna died in 1649, and Judith died fairly old, at the age of seventy-seven in 1662.

Documents show that Shakespeare was very sharp and exacting in money matters. He was one of the shareholders of the Globe Playhouse, from which he earned a handsome profit annually. In Stratford, where he would finally return in 1613, after the Globe burnt down, he would invest money in real estate business, buying big houses and lands: "barns and garners never empty," as he writes in *The Tempest*. He also purchased the Blackfriars Gatehouse in London in 1613 for 70 pounds. He gave that too to Susanna.

There is a good conjecture that Shakespeare may have died of a fever contracted from overdrinking. Or the unsettling circumstances involving his younger daughter may have hastened his death. On 25 March 1616 he revised his will, and, to the historians' puzzlement even today, left "my second-best bed" as a bequest to his wife. Many biographers conjecture that Shakespeare may not have had a happy married life, because they had no more children after 1585, and Shakespeare wrote in his will, "to my wife," a curt, rather indifferent, expression compared to "to my loving wife," or "my well-beloved wife," which was more customary.

Shakespeare was buried in the chancel of Holy Trinity Church. The epitaph, which he probably wrote for his own grave, reads:

*Good friend for Jesus' sake forbear,
To dig the dust enclosed here:
Blest be the man that spares these stones,
And curst be he that moves my bones.*

This cautionary epitaph is mainly intended at forbidding gravediggers not to remove his bones. That probability was there as was so perceptively shown by Shakespeare in the graveyard scene in Hamlet.

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The legacy of Shakespeare

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MATHEW Arnold paid the highest tribute to Shakespeare when he said in "To Shakespeare", "Others abide our question. Thou art free." Arnold's absolute of Shakespeare gives us a measure of the immense influence the Elizabethan bard wields centuries after his death. Again Shakespeare's unquestionable authority is reinforced when A.B. Aldrich heralds in 'King William': "Yet 'twas the king of England's kings / The rest with all their pomps and trains / Are mouldered, half-remembered things---/ 'Tis he alone that lives and reigns!"

It seems beyond dispute that Shakespeare is pre-eminent among all literary figures. His plays pack theatres and provide Hollywood blockbusters with scripts, and his works are considered fundamental to the teaching of English literature, inspiring millions of pages of scholarship and criticism every year around the globe. He has given us many of the words we speak, even the thoughts we think. Shakespeare's gift for a well-turned phrase is without parallel and he is frequently quoted even by persons who have never seen or read his plays. His plays provide lessons of all sweet and honourable thoughts and actions, teach decency, courtesy, benignity, generosity and humility which are universal and eternal. His works have given pleasure to readers and viewers for almost four centuries. It is, therefore, plain that his popularity is not merely a passing fad. As his works have stood the test of time, it seems reasonable to assume that the works of Shakespeare will continue to be popular for a good many centuries to come.

Shakespeare came to our part of the world carried by the colonial rulers. But in course of time he proved more of the ruled than the rulers, and it is no wonder that Shakespeare at once cast his magic spell upon us. Right from the time when the study of English literature was introduced at Hindu College in Calcutta, Shakespeare has been a favourite subject of study among Bengali students. Nirad C. Chowdhury informs us how a cult was built around Shakespeare in nineteenth century Bengal: "I do not know if any other country or people in the world has ever made one author the epitome, test and symbol of literary culture as we did with Shakespeare."

Michael Madhusudan Dutt, father of Bengali blank verse and himself a fine classical scholar, was an ardent admirer of Shakespeare. This great poet was known to quote frequently from Macbeth --- "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow / Creeps in the petty pace from day to day / To the last syllable of recorded time" at the twilight of his life.

Bankimchandra Chatterjee was fond of using quotations from Shakespeare as chapter headings. Vidyasagar, the Sanskrit scholar, who had a shrewd understanding of the genius of Shakespeare, translated *The Comedy of Errors* and called it *Bhantibilas*. Rabindranath Tagore's sonnet-34 included in *Balaka* is a fine tribute paid by one great poet to another.

Though the Indian empire is no more, Shakespeare has established his sovereignty over the people who live in the territories formerly covered by that empire. The Indians discarded the British but retained Shakespeare. Even while gripped in the throes of the fight for freedom, its pioneers had the magnanimity to stop and pay homage to an English poet in whose writings they found an unequivocal denunciation of any group or individual who seeks to usurp the rights of another. In Shakespeare's "The Tempest" Caliban, the ruled, gibes at the ruler as if he were a mouthpiece of the colonized masses: "You taught me language / And my profit on 't is / I know how to curse / The red plague rid you / For learning me your language."

Relatively few people today read the works of Chaucer, Virgil or even Homer. But a large body of readers still read and enjoy Shakespeare. In our hours of joy and anguish, in our moments of happiness and sorrow, in our moments of meditative calm and philosophical resignation, it is Shakespeare's thoughts and his language that come instinctively to our minds. Whether it is Antony's oratory or Prospero's magic or Rosalind's romantic adventures, the effect on our minds is that of something that can touch us deeply, stir our imagination and whet our appetites for more of the same stuff. The more thoughtful ones among Shakespeare's readers prefer his tragedies to his comedies. Though Shakespeare has no real philosophy of his own, they are much impressed by the deep thoughts on life and death and different other subjects that he put here and there into his plays. Even the most casual readers are struck by Shakespeare's ability to put himself inside the skin of every type of human being from a king to a clown with equal facility. And the wonderful thing about his characters is that you cannot quite make up your mind about them and the last word on how to take these characters will perhaps always remain unsaid. Just think of Shylock. The predatory money-lender and hard-core villain, arouses our pity when he pleads for universal humanity, "Hath not a Jew eyes? / Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimension, senses / healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the / same winter and summer, as a Christian is?"

Consider the case of the saintly Angelo slowly losing himself into the charm of a majestic young lady and reasoning with himself against irresistible temptation and then succumbing to it which brings forth the basic human instincts that underpin Shakespeare's plays: "If the thieves for their robbery have authority / when thieves steal themselves: what, do I love her, / that I desire to hear her speak again? / And feast upon her eyes? O cunning enemy, that to catch a saint / with saints dost bait thy hook."

Then you cannot fail to notice the philosophical streak of Shakespeare when you hear the Prince in 'Romeo and Juliet' asserting, "Mercy but murders, pardoning those that kill", or Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark,

declaring, "Why then it is none to you; for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so. To me it is a prison, or a clown playing the wise saying, "Some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrown upon them".

Shakespeare chose to give Hamlet some of the most dazzling poetry he ever wrote. The prince marvels at the immensity of man "What a piece of work is man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god, the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals and yet, to me what is this quintessence of dust?"

You cannot miss the undercurrent of wit that goes with Shakespeare when the great poet puts the lover, the poet and the madman on the same footing, insanity being common to all. As you leaf through *Twelfth Night* you relish with a smile on your lips the intimation of the mysterious chemistry that defines love which, unable to find expression, saps the vitality of a young lover, 'She never told her love / But let concealment like a worm i'th'bud / Feed on her damask cheek: She pin'd in thought, / And with a green and yellow melancholy, / She sat like patience on a monument, smiling at grief.'

Where else can you find the like of the cynically fascinating character who is glorifying the very man he killed? You hear Brutus saying, "As Caesar loved me I weep for him, as he was fortunate I rejoice at it; as he was valiant I honour him, but as he was ambitious I slew him."

That lying can be a fine art is brought home to you when you hear from the mouth of a Shakespearean character, "He will lie, sir, with such volubility that truth will think as if it were a fool."

A fairly large body of our readers of earlier generation treated Shakespeare as if he were only a poet. Poetry in the east was supposed by the common reader to serve purposes apparently different from those that Shakespeare's poetry expressed. It was expected to be instructive, to have a didactic aim in view, to drive great moral lessons home. Shakespeare excites such readers most when he repeats in ornamental poetic phrase a trite observation about human life or nature. All one has to do to prove this is to consider the popularity of such quotations as "frailty, thy name is woman," "life is full of sound and fury signifying nothing", "All that glitters is not gold", etc. We have all heard such quotations repeated even by those who have not read a page of Shakespeare.

There are other quotations of this kind which have become part of the idiom spoken by the English-knowing classes. They are valued for their epigrammatic quality, for their terseness, sometimes because they contain a word or phrase which savours of something exotically beautiful. However, their popularity is doubtless proof of Shakespeare's appeal; but by no means can they prove beyond doubt that Shakespeare is really understood.

In our universities there is a tendency to forget that Shakespeare meant his plays to be acted. He was an actor himself and took part in his own plays as well as in those written by others. Our students seldom see his plays acted; they read them, are examined on them but hardly ever play them. None can deny that there is a great deal of latent talent among our students and this could be utilized in the production of some of these plays. These productions may not be completely successful---no production ever is but the moment students start acting their parts, the words and characters of Shakespeare will become alive and they will get more enjoyment from the plays than they would have got by simply reading them. They would also have a deeper understanding of the plays because it is a fact that when a play is acted its meaning becomes clearer and the relationship between the different characters are brought into proper focus. Not that acting on Shakespeare's plays is totally unheard of. Sometimes one or two plays are acted here and there by English Department students but that too is few and far between. Far from being an unceasing fountain of pleasure which a lively stage performance is all about, Shakespeare largely exists in pages of books, long abandoned and strewn with dust that adorn the shelves of old libraries.

Must we then reconcile ourselves to the prospect of Shakespeare being forgotten? There are, it seems to me, two possible ways out of this situation. The first is to ensure that at least those who specialize in English literature at the university level are given a good grounding in Shakespeare. This will guarantee that we shall have in the country at least a small class of people capable of understanding Shakespeare in the original. Secondly, Shakespeare must be made available in good translation to those who do not know English or who have a poor command of the language.

To forget Shakespeare would be to throw away the best part of what we have received from the west. No matter what we say, Shakespeare in a non-English speaking country like ours must in the ultimate analysis remain the responsibility, if I may so put it, of the academics or of a small minority of readers and admirers. If they are convinced, as we believe they are, that Shakespeare represents something priceless, embodying some of the highest values of which man has any knowledge, offering us poetry and drama of an order almost unmatched in the history of civilization, keeping his memory alive must be considered a service to civilization itself.

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Note

The concluding part of Raana Haider's Bargain Bin Books (the first part of which appeared last week) will be published next week.