

Once more unto the breach

Photo by: Marketing Aloud

Stephen Roberts comes over all Shakespearian as he throws himself wholeheartedly into our challenge to find out more about the man himself on the 400th anniversary of his death. Your challenge is to spot all 24 of his Bardish quotes and identify which plays they're from before turning to the last page

Royal Shakespeare Theatre

As merry as the day is long, that's me, so characteristically happy to be asked to write about the Bard for Shakespeare 400.

Hopefully you're 'au fait' and not 'the common curse of mankind - folly and ignorance.' 'Shakespeare 400' commemorates the death of Stratford's most famous son on April 23, 1616. We may not know for sure when he was born (sometime April 1564), but we know when he died.

'And thereby hangs a tale,' for Will gave us so many pithy phrases that we talk Shakespeare, often without realising. Here

was a story to unearth. I've included three 'Bardish' quotes already; I intend to pebble-dash you with many more, 24 in total in fact. Make sure you spot them all.

I headed for Stratford in January, saying farewell to 'Mrs Steve', for 'parting is such sweet sorrow.' It was now me, the Bard and my brother, a Stratford resident. I wanted to find Shakespeare, understanding what influenced his writing. He had a lot to thank the Reformation for; religious drama replaced by secular drama and London playhouses. A new entertainment industry was upon us, and for Will, suddenly, 'all the world's a stage.'

The only known fact about young Will is

the announcement in the Stratford Parish Church register (April 26, 1564) that, William, John Shakespeare's son, was baptised. Plague visited Stratford between July and December 1564, killing 237 souls, suggesting he was lucky to prosper. Nothing further is known until his wedding in November 1582, by which time he was 18½. His birthday remains a mystery. These big gaps in our knowledge were not good news for someone trying to write an authoritative 'Shakespeare', for, 'these words are razors to my wounded heart.'

I began at the end, a quote the Bard might have fancied. Having settled into the Mercure Shakespeare, dating from 1637, so

1564, where he spent his childhood. The place bridges those first two verifiable parts of his life, for Will lived here until he hitched, followed by the first five years of marriage. It is a place other writers visited, presumably looking for inspiration. Here is the Glover's Workshop where Will's father toiled, plus the little sprat's birthing room and bedchamber. There's also the giftshop and Shakespeare Centre, first established in 1964. Of course, all may have been lost, if the Americans had prevailed and shipped the birthplace across the Atlantic. One of those writers was instrumental in preventing that, raising funds to help the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust purchase the building. 'I cannot tell what the Dickens his name is.' It was a close-run thing. 'Out of the jaws of death,' one might say.

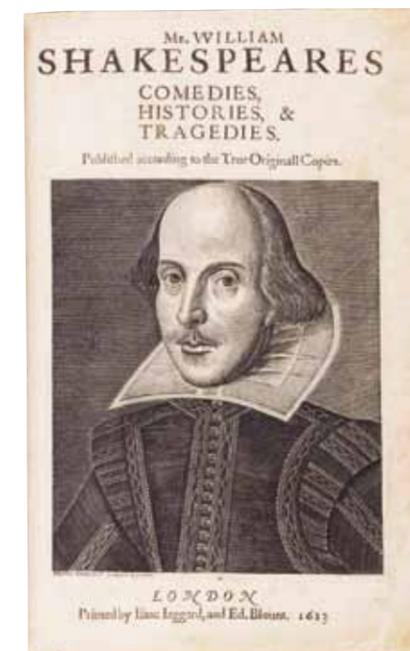
It is likely Will attended King Edward VI School, although there are no pupil lists, so no proof. The fellow is a will-o'-the-wisp in his early days. What the boy learned, however, is discernible from his writing. 'It was Greek to me'. Well, it's possible; boys often learnt the classics then. We were fortunate to be shown around Shakespeare's Schoolroom & Guildhall by Sarah Jervis-Hill, ahead of its public opening in April and were joined by Richard Mallison, a man who taught here for 47 years. When the building opens with its interpretations, exhibitions and experiences, it will be apt that King Edward's will still use it in the mornings. From these acorns oaks will grow, for even

'the smallest worm will turn.' We had to tread carefully in what was a hard-hat zone, for 'the better part of valour is discretion.'

And what was Shakespeare's childhood like? We don't know. There is no indication in his writing that he had sad memories. It is possible he may have been 'spoiled', being the first son to prosper after two earlier children succumbed to infant mortality. Perhaps he enjoyed a free and easy childhood in a liberal home, then, by contrast, found school dull and gloomy. Who knows? Was Will's a riverside boyhood of fishing and bathing? There is a lot of country-lore in Shakespeare's writing, but this didn't necessarily all have roots in this locale. The adult writer (and actor) travelled widely; he knew his England.

One place I couldn't visit was Mary Arden's Farm, a modernised Tudor house, which reopened for the season in March. Will's mother (Mary Arden) grew up here in Wilmcote, one of eight sisters, before marrying Will's father around 1557. Young Will would have known this place from visits to his grandparents in the 1570s, so this is another tantalising part of his early story, the Ardens' comparative grandeur something the Shakespeares tried to match. This is still a working farm complete with Tudor farm hands and rare-breed animals, and the nearby Mary Arden Inn is popular.

Did Shakespeare go to Oxford? It's possible; the fact his name does not appear



Frontispiece of the first folio collection of Shakespeare's plays, published in 1623, featuring an engraving by Martin Droeshout



Photo courtesy of Shakespeare Birthplace Trust

Shakespeare's Birthplace

in student rolls proving nothing, as these were loosely kept. 'T's neither here nor there.' It would have been natural, however, for a Stratfordian to attend Oxford, just 40 miles away.

Will courted his bride-to-be at the picturesque Hathaway home, a thatched farmhouse, in Shottery, where Anne helped run farm and house. Just over one mile from the town centre, here is an 'oasis' with some original furniture, the Hathaway bed, the Cottage Garden Café, all set within stunning grounds. Anne was some eight years older than Will and was 'with child' when they married. 'The course of true love never did run smooth.' Speaking of

Shakespeare Birthplace Trust (buildings / date of acquisition)

- Shakespeare's Birthplace: 1847
-
- New Place/Nash's House: 1876
-
- Anne Hathaway's Cottage: 1892
-
- Mary Arden's Farm: 1930
-
- Hall's Croft: 1949

love, I purchased a declaratory fridge-magnet for Mrs Steve, 'a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles,' perhaps, but my soulmate liked it.

I was privileged to get a sneak tour, courtesy of Nic Fulcher, of Shakespeare's

New Place, in Chapel Street, closed until the summer for conservation work. This is the site of the only home Will ever bought here, in May 1597, so an important link in the chain of his life. He was now successful and wealthy, so could afford the chief house in the borough (ten fireplaces and around 20 rooms), which he owned for his last 19 years. The timing of his only son's death (Hamnet, aged eleven) the year before could have prompted Will to cement links with his hometown. The site is being transformed into a contemporary heritage landmark, the 'single most significant and enduring Shakespearian project anywhere in the world to commemorate 400 years of his legacy;' with a new exhibition centre opening next door in Nash's House, home of Shakespeare's granddaughter Elizabeth (1530s). Sadly Will's house was demolished in 1702, with its replacement following just over 50 years later. The word is, the last of these was flattened, the piqued owner fed-up at the numbers knocking to enquire about Shakespeare. He probably felt he was, 'more sinned against than sinning.' Now, New Place will get a new lease of life, with spectacular gardens. 'We are such stuff as dreams are made on.'

Trying to get closer to the Shakespeare family brought us to Hall's Croft, in Old Town, home to Susanna Shakespeare (1583-1649), Will's eldest child, and



Anne Hathaway's Cottage



Photo by Marketing Aloud

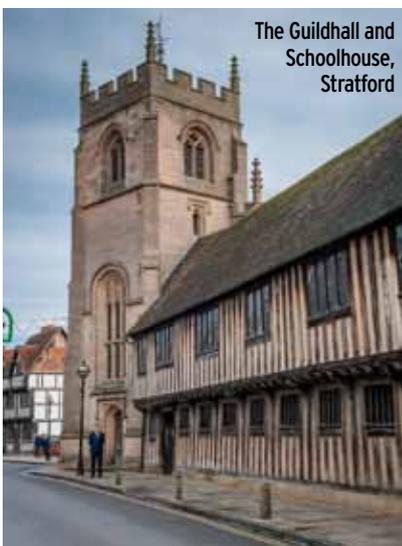


Where to stay:

Mercure Shakespeare, www.mercure.com
 The Church Street Townhouse, www.churchst-th.co.uk
 For more suggestions and information on accommodation visit <http://shakespeares-england.co.uk/shakespeare-2016> or follow the online conversation at #Shakespeare2016

Holy Trinity Church, where Shakespeare lies buried

Photo by John Cairns



The Guildhall and Schoolhouse, Stratford

husband, John Hall, a wealthy physician, the area's principal medical man. As befitted a chap at the top of his profession, this was an elegant house, with pleasant aromas wafting from fragrant herbal remedies. Today, house and walled garden, offer calm and tranquillity. We had lunch in the café, before exploring the garden. My brother paid. 'Neither a borrower nor a lender be.' We requested plain fare; sandwich and a little something on the side. 'My salad days.' The sustenance was done and it was time to Bard-search again. 'Once more unto the breach'

Trying to get a feel for the adult Shakespeare's Stratford, took us to three-storey Harvard House, the town's most elaborately decorated Elizabethan

house in the High Street, with fine exterior oak carvings, 16th century stained-glass and painted panels within. Built by local businessman Thomas Rogers in 1596, this building appeared just before Will bought New Place, a few hundred yards away. It sits next to Stratford's oldest pub, the 'Garrick' and is open more regularly while New Place is closed.

We tend to think of Shakespeare as an Elizabethan gent and three-quarters of his life occurred during the reign of the 'Virgin Queen', but the Jacobean theatre (James I) saw a late flowering, when some of the Bard's greatest plays were written, including 'Othello', 'King Lear', 'Measure for Measure', 'Anthony and Cleopatra', 'The Winter's Tale' and 'The Tempest'.

Shakespeare Events

Step into Shakespeare's shoes - footsteps, handprints and speech bubbles on pavements.

March 12-October 30: Mary Arden's Farm - the sights, sounds and smells of a working Tudor farm

March 14-20: Shakespeare Week: a national celebration for primary school children

from March 19: Well Said!

exhibition of favourite Shakespeare Quotes, RSC

April 19: Concert featuring world-renowned opera singers, Holy Trinity Church

April 22: Ex Cathedra Shakespeare Masque concert world premiere in Holy Trinity Church

April 23: Birthday celebrations, including RSC live broadcast on BBC2

April 23: Shakespeare's Schoolroom & Guildhall opens to the public for the first time

April 24: Sonnet Rap Marathon, Shakespeare's Birthplace

April 30-May 2: May Day at Mary Arden's Farm

June 15-July 16: A Midsummer Night's Dream: A Play for the Nation, RSC

June 19-25: Magic at Midsummer, Avonbank Gardens.

July 1: Shakespeare's New Place re-opens

July 23: Big Picnic at Anne Hathaway's Cottage

July 31-August 6: World Shakespeare Congress. Stratford and London

September 22-25: Stratford-upon-Avon Poetry Festival

Those quotes

'Neither a borrower nor a lender be' (Hamlet)

'It was Greek to me' (Julius Caesar)

'The course of true love never did run smooth' (A Midsummer Night's Dream)

'My salad days' (Anthony and Cleopatra)

'The smallest worm will turn' (Henry VI, Part III)

'Once more unto the breach' (Henry V)

'He hath eaten me out of house and home' (Henry IV, Part II)

'The better part of valour is discretion' (Henry IV, Part I)

'Out of the jaws of death' (Twelfth Night)

'A snapper-up of unconsidered trifles' (The Winter's Tale)

'The common curse of mankind - folly and ignorance' (Troilus and Cressida)

'We are such stuff as dreams are made on' (The Tempest)

'And thereby hangs a tale' (Taming of the Shrew)

'As merry as the day is long' (Much Ado About Nothing)

'I cannot tell what the Dickens his name is' (The Merry Wives of Windsor)

'I have not slept one wink' (Cymbeline)

'All the world's a stage' (As You Like It)

'These words are razors to my wounded heart' (Titus Andronicus)

'We have seen better days' (Timon of Athens)

'T's neither here nor there' (Othello)

'What's done is done' (Macbeth)

'More sinned against than sinning' (King Lear)

'Parting is such sweet sorrow' (Romeo and Juliet)

'In the twinkling of an eye' (The Merchant of Venice)

Photo courtesy of Shakespeare Birthplace Trust



Mary Arden's Farm (Palmer's Cottage), Stratford

The witches of 'Macbeth' may have been inspired by James' interest in the phenomenon, a monarch who was a more enthusiastic patron of drama than Elizabeth had been.

So many plays (38) and so many characters. My hotel had 74 bedrooms, each named after a Shakespearean play or character. My room was 'Julius Caesar', who came to a sticky end amidst a flurry of dagger blows. It was a lovely, contented room, after all, it was 'Titus Andronicus' that was the Bard's bloodiest play. 'I have not slept one wink.' Poor Pisanio. I slept for a blissful eight hours and dreamed not of

daggers. My 'Bruv' normally puts me up, but oft complains that, 'he hath eaten me out of house and home,' such is my appetite. Here I dined in Marco's.

And finally to Holy Trinity, where the Bard lies buried and where we find the words he wrote for his own grave. Will has plenty of company. Anne is here, daughter Susanna and the doctor, plus Thomas Nash, first husband of Will's granddaughter Elizabeth. 'What's done is done?' And those words? They end, 'and cursed be he that moves my bones.'

Looks like Will won't be departing Stratford anytime soon. ■

References:

Shakespeare Birthplace Trust
(www.shakespeare.org.uk)

William Shakespeare Info
(www.william-shakespeare.info)

Visit Stratford-upon-Avon
(www.visitstratforduponavon.co.uk)

Tudors (P Ackroyd, 2012)

Civil War (P Ackroyd, 2014)

Shakespeare (I Brown, 1949)

Acknowledgements:

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