

The Works of William Shakespeare Remain Full of Life

Welcome to EXPLORATIONS in VOA Special English. I'm Mario Ritter. Today, Steve Ember and Barbara Klein tell us about one of the most influential and skillful writers in the history of literature. For more than four hundred years, people around the world and in many cultures have been reading, watching and listening to the plays and poetry of the English writer William Shakespeare.

Juliet: Ay me!

Romeo: She speaks:

O, speak again, bright angel!

Juliet: O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?

Deny thy father and refuse thy name;

Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,

And I'll no longer be a Capulet.

You just heard part of a famous scene from a movie version of "Romeo and Juliet." This tragic play remains one of the greatest, and perhaps most famous, love stories ever told. It tells about two young people who meet and fall deeply in love. But their families, the Capulets and the Montagues, are enemies and will not allow them to be together. Romeo and Juliet are surrounded by violent fighting and generational conflict. The young lovers secretly marry, but their story has a tragic ending.

"Romeo and Juliet" shows how William Shakespeare's plays shine with extraordinarily rich and imaginative language. He invented thousands of words to color his works. They have become part of the English language. Shakespeare's universal stories show all the human emotions and conflicts. His works are as fresh today as they were four hundred years ago.

William Shakespeare was born in fifteen sixty-four in the town of Stratford-upon-Avon. He married Anne Hathaway at the age of eighteen. The couple had three children, two daughters and a son who died very young. Shakespeare moved to London in the late fifteen eighties to be at the center

of the city's busy theater life.

Most people think of Shakespeare as a writer. But he was also a theater producer, a part owner of an acting company and an actor. For most of his career, he was a producer and main writer for an acting company called the King's Men.

In fifteen ninety-nine Shakespeare's company was successful enough to build its own theater called The Globe. Public theaters during this time were usually three floor levels high and were built around a stage area where the actors performed. The Globe could hold as many as three thousand people. People from all levels of society would attend performances.

The poorer people could buy tickets for a small amount of money to stand near the stage. Wealthier people could buy more costly tickets to sit in other areas.

Often it was not very important if wealthy people could see the stage well. It was more important that they be in a seat where everyone could see them.

It was difficult to light large indoor spaces during this time. The Globe was an outdoor theater with no roof on top so that sunlight could stream in. Because of the open-air stage, actors had to shout very loudly and make big motions to be heard and seen by all. This acting style is quite different from play-acting today. It might also surprise you that all actors during this period were men. Young boys in women's clothing played the roles of female characters. This is because it was against the law in England for women to act onstage.

Shakespeare's theater group also performed in other places such as the smaller indoor Blackfriars Theater. Or, they would travel around the countryside to perform. Sometimes they were asked to perform at the palace of the English ruler Queen Elizabeth, or later, King James the First.

Shakespeare is best known for the thirty-nine plays that he wrote, although only thirty-eight exist today. His plays are usually divided into three groups: comedies, histories and tragedies. The comedies are playful and funny. They usually deal with marriage and the funny activities of people in love. These comedies often tell many stories at the same time, like plays within plays.

"Much Ado About Nothing" is a good example of a Shakespearian comedy. It tells the story of two couples. Benedick and Beatrice each claim they will never marry. They enjoy attacking each other with funny insults. Their friends work out a plan to make the two secretly fall in love.

Claudio and Hero are the other couple. They fall in love at once and plan to marry. But Claudio wrongly accuses Hero of being with another man and refuses to marry her. Hero's family decides to make Claudio believe that she is dead until her innocence can be proved. Claudio soon realizes his mistake and mourns for Hero. By the end of the play, love wins over everyone and there is a marriage ceremony for the four lovers.

Shakespeare's histories are intense explorations of actual English rulers. This was a newer kind of play that developed during Shakespeare's time. Other writers may have written historical plays, but no one could match Shakespeare's skill. Plays about rulers like Henry the Fourth and Richard the Third explore Britain's history during a time when the country was going through tense political struggles.

Many Shakespearian tragedies are about conflicting family loyalties or a character seeking to punish others for the wrongful death of a loved one. "Hamlet" tells the story of the son of the king of Denmark. When Hamlet's father unexpectedly dies, his uncle Claudius becomes ruler and marries Hamlet's mother. One night a ghostly spirit visits Hamlet and tells him that Claudius killed his father.

Hamlet decides to pretend that he is crazy to learn if this is true. This intense play captures the conflicted inner life of Hamlet. This young man must struggle between his moral beliefs and his desire to seek punishment for his father's death. Here is a famous speech from a movie version of "Hamlet." The actor Laurence Olivier shines in this difficult role.

Hamlet: "To be, or not to be: that is the question:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,

And by opposing end them?"

Shakespeare also wrote one of greatest collections of poems in English literature. He wrote several long poems, but is best known for his one hundred and fifty-four short poems, or sonnets. The English sonnet has a very exact structure. It must have fourteen lines, with three groups of four lines that set up the subject or problem of the poem. The sonnet is resolved

in the last two lines of the poem.

If that requirement seems demanding, Shakespeare’s sonnets are also written in iambic pentameter. This is a kind of structure in which each line has ten syllables or beats with a stress on every second beat.

Even with these restrictive rules, the sonnets seem effortless. They have the most creative language and imaginative comparisons of any other poems. Most of the sonnets are love poems. Some of them are attacks while others are celebrations. The sonnets express everything from pain and death to desire, wisdom, and happiness.

Here is one of Shakespeare's most famous poems. Sonnet Eighteen tells about the lasting nature of poetry. The speaker describes how the person he loves will remain forever young and beautiful in the lines of this poem.

*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometimes too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
And every fair from fair sometimes declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

In part two, we explore ways that Shakespeare’s work has influenced world culture. This program was written and produced by Dana Demange. Steve Ember and Barbara Klein were our announcers. You can read and listen to this program and other Learning English products on our Web site, learningenglish.voanews.com. Join us again next week for EXPLORATIONS in VOA Special English.