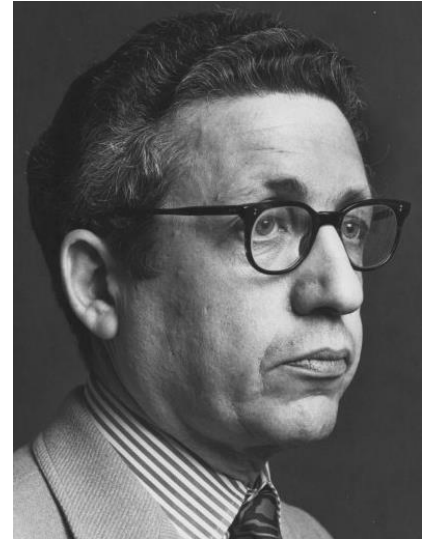


Today concludes the discussion we started on Monday of the greatest writer ever to live: WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE.

Where to start to explain how great he was? He and the KING JAMES BIBLE (which I mentioned on Monday, and which Shakespeare played a part in producing) were the biggest and best influences on the English language in history, which is why those who don't love English or the English have always been hostile to young people like you reading Shakespeare or the King James Bible. They are our greatest inheritance, but too many people are persuaded to completely ignore them. BERNARD LEVIN, whose book *ENTHUSIASMS* I have mentioned before (April 12), gives you a bit of a clue as to the impact Shakespeare had on the English language:

If you cannot understand my argument, and declare "It's Greek to me", you are quoting Shakespeare; if you claim to be more sinned against than sinning, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you recall your salad days, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you act more in sorrow than in anger, if your wish is father to the thought, if your lost property has vanished into thin air, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you have ever refused to budge an inch or suffered from green-eyed jealousy, if you have played fast and loose, if you have been tongue-tied, a tower of strength, hoodwinked or in a pickle, if you have knitted your brows, made a virtue of necessity, insisted on fair play, slept not one wink, stood on ceremony, danced attendance (on your lord and master), laughed yourself into stitches, had short shrift, cold comfort or too much of a good thing, if you have seen better days or lived in a fool's paradise - why, be that as it may, the more fool you, for it is a foregone conclusion that you are (as good luck would have it) quoting Shakespeare; if you think it is early days and clear out bag and baggage, if you think it is high time and that that is the long and short of it, if you believe the game is up and that truth will out even if it involves your own flesh and blood, if you lie low till the crack of doom because you suspect foul play, if you have your teeth set on edge (at one fell swoop) without rhyme or reason, then - to give the devil his due - if the truth were known (for surely you have a tongue in your head) you are quoting Shakespeare; even if you bid me good riddance and send me packing, if you wish I was dead as a doornail, if you think I am an eyesore, a laughing stock, the devil incarnate, a stony-hearted villain, bloody-minded or a blinking idiot, then - by Jove! O Lord! Tut, tut! for goodness' sake! what the dickens! but me no buts - it is all one to me, for you are quoting Shakespeare.



But it's not just Shakespeare's ability to coin a memorable phrase (and I'm sure he probably came up with that expression as well) that made him so great. While he never really came up with a story of his own (all his plays were based on things he had read), he was better at telling a story, in the most amazing language, than anyone who ever lived. Take JULIET, desperately wanting to see her love ROMEO:

Come, gentle night, come, loving, black-browed night,
Give me my Romeo. And when I shall die,
Take him and cut him out in little stars,



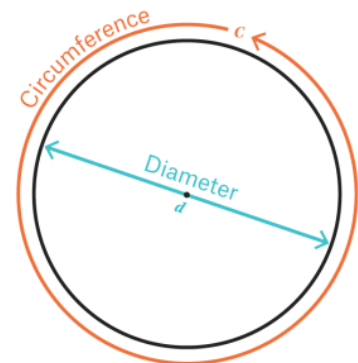
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night
And pay no worship to the garish sun.

Words so amazing that in 1964 - 370 years after Romeo and Juliet was written - ROBERT F KENNEDY used them to describe his dead brother PRESIDENT JOHN F KENNEDY, who had been killed the year before. (And we will get round to talking about that at some stage.) Here is a clip of him quoting Shakespeare's words:
<https://youtu.be/UhGwb7WQWb8?t=179>

Or this speech about England, from Shakespeare's play RICHARD II:

This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall,
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands,
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.

And for every speech like that, there are hundreds more in Shakespeare's plays - far too many for me to quote here. So instead I will tell you one more reason why Shakespeare was the best ever. To understand that, watch this clip from the fantastic TV series 'PERSON OF INTEREST'. The clip is not about Shakespeare at all, but the number pi, which is the number you get whenever you divided the length of the perimeter (or circumference) of a circle by its diameter:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yGmYCfWyVAM>
'Everything we ever say, or do, all of the world's infinite possibilities rest within this one simple circle.' And the same is true of Shakespeare.



In the play AS YOU LIKE IT, one of the characters says 'All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances'. Shakespeare's plays contain the entire world - all the possible people you can be as a human being, you can find them all in Shakespeare. So if everything in the world was destroyed, except the knowledge of English and the plays of Shakespeare, aliens from another civilisation might get an odd idea of the history or geography of the world, but they would understand what it was to be a human being, and what types of human being once walked upon the Earth.

But in order to allow himself to present the world to itself through his plays, Shakespeare himself had to disappear - he couldn't impose his own personality or his own preferences on his characters, because then they would just be reflections of him rather than reflections of the world. And that's why Shakespeare is so elusive - we don't really know what he was like. He is always off-stage, watching us, while we are unable to see him. And that has led some to

doubt whether the William Shakespeare who travelled from Stratford-upon-Avon to London to seek his fortune, leaving his family behind, was really the author of the plays that he is supposed to have written. If he was this great playwright, they say, we would know much more about him. But that's the point - he's a great playwright because we know very little about him, and we know everything about his characters because his characters - they are us. So if you want to find yourself and discover more about yourself and the people around you, read Shakespeare!