

## **Shakespeare's Incandescent Luminosity of words – A Study of Bard of Avon's Vocabulary**

**Ritu Kumar**

**Associate Professor, M.L.N. College, Yamuna Nagar, Haryana, India.**

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Considering that Shakespeare did not even go to college, the magnitude of his intellect baffles our imagination. He is considered the greatest genius ever born because of his insight into every aspect of human behaviour and emotion. The last quarter of the eighteenth and nineteenth century saw an enormous consolidation of almost all the aspects of Shakespeare's genius. His position as "a classic and contemporary with all ages" (Griffith 249) is firmly established; new editions and commentaries appeared in 1778, 1780, 1783, 1785, 1790, and 1793; dozens of books of criticism or literary history have substantial discussions of his work, and incidental references abound in books, magazines, newspapers, lectures, novels, letters, theatre reviews, and poetry. His prestige is so great that he is seen not only as England's greatest writer but as the world's greatest genius mankind has ever known. To Horace Walpole, writing in 1778 he is "Superior to all mankind" (qtd. in Lewis 415). The Critical Review began one of its many Shakespeare articles with a panegyric which typifies the general tone of admiration:

Every new enquiry into the dramatic works of Shakespeare renders the transcendency of his talents more conspicuous. While he possessed such an astonishing power of imagination in conceiving and describing characters as no other poet, either in ancient or modern times, ever displayed, he abounded also in sentiments and precepts of the greatest utility in the conduct of human life. With equal lease his unlimited genius pervaded philosophy and nature, and he informs the head, at the same time that he agitates the heart with irresistible emotions. (203)

To William Belsham, Shakespeare is "the most figurative writer . . . in our language;" (18) who surpasses all others in his skills in versification, in moving the passion, and in fascinating and enhancing all the attention. Richard Hole pays a glowing tribute to Shakespeare's "The wonder-working power" (250). His greatest strength was imparting individuality and personality to a character, when other dramatists were satisfied with characters who become 'types,' Shakespeare creates his characters in such a way that they became like real people. His delineation of character is par excellence. It is precisely for this reason that scholars and soothsayers, poets, and philosophers frequent the pages of Shakespeare's plays as often as soldiers and statesman, artisans, and aristocrats. In the various universe of his work, contraries of life contend with each other, creating an environment marked by love as well as lust, grace as well as greed, devotion as well as deceit, knowledge as well as power. Holding mirror up to all this, Shakespeare shows the stages of life with continuous strife between the opposing forces of the human and the inhuman.

He packed his plays with 9, 36, 433 (about one million) words out of which 27, 870 are 'different words,' the highest vocabulary in history. His colossal and extraordinary vocabulary represented 40 percent of the total vocabulary of the English language up to the year 1623 and we must keep in mind that Shakespeare had no access to any dictionary to learn those words. In 1867, the Reverend Aaron Augustus Morgan, published *The Mind of Shakespeare, as Exhibited in His Works*. The volume

consists of a series of quotations, ordered under alphabetical headings from 'Absence' to 'Youth.' It contains many of passages learned by rote in Victorian classrooms and taken at face value as embodiments of the "mind of William Shakespeare, at once Dramatist, Poet, Philosopher, humorist, and critical delineator of human nature." To put it in perspective, the average person has only a speaking and writing vocabulary ranging from 2,000 to 3,000 words and a recognition capacity of about 5,000 words. In great writers and literary luminaries this figure grows tremendously. Milton had a vocabulary of 10,000 words and Homer around 9,000 words. The King James Bible has 8,000 words. Webster's third New International Dictionary lists 4, 50, 000 words while the Oxford English Dictionary lists 6, 15, 000. Today, Modern English has two million words followed by the German language which has 1, 86, 000 words, Russian with 1, 36, 000 words, and French with a pathetic figure of 1, 26, 000 words. Thus Shakespeare in the 16<sup>th</sup> century used five times the total number of words in modern German. It speaks volume of Shakespeare's mastery over English language and his dexterity to put these words to precision and achieve perfect diction.

Turning from dramatic structure to language, we are struck by the affront which Shakespearean invention and Elizabethan English gave to eighteenth century ideas of correctness. Although earlier critics, such as Upton and Hurl had urged a descriptive approach to Shakespeare, to establish his own system of grammatical usage rather than merely belabor him for not meeting present day standards of correctness (such as, injunctions had been forgotten). As is by now abundantly clear, of all the traditions in Shakespeare criticism in the eighteenth century, that to do with language and style was the most tenuous and short-lived. There are some descriptive observations, such as Ritson's, which draw our attention to a singular verb agreeing with plural noun, and his using personal and impersonal pronouns 'indiscriminately,' or frequently confounding the active and passive participles and the definite and indefinite article. Mason also notices Shakespearean usages such as 'pretend' meaning 'intend,' and 'exorcise' meaning not to lay spirits but to raise them. Malone has some neutral observations as on Shakespeare's use of nouns as verbs and gives a list of unusual words used in *Othello*, but in his preface to the 1790 edition, Malone can award Shakespeare the highest Augustan honor that of being the great refiner and polisher of our language.

Shakespeare is the most quoted writer in history. His plays have been translated into 50 languages. In Oxford Dictionary of Quotations containing about 20,000 quotations, Shakespeare alone monopolizes a staggering 60 pages. He coined 1,700 new words in the English language. It is not widely known that he is the first person to have used words like accommodation, aerial, assassination, bedroom, castigate, courtship, dishearten, exposure, eventful, generous, exposure, gnarled, radiance, laughable, hurry, reliance, lapse etc. Many of the phrases and expressions coined by him are now in daily use. Thus if you were to say 'brevity is the soul of wit,' 'there's the rib,' 'the apparel oft proclaims the man,' 'neither a borrower not a lender be,' 'paint the lily,' 'the milk of human kindness,' 'the most unkindest cut of all,' 'a heart of gold,' 'laugh yourself into stitches,' 'more sinned against sinning,' 'if music be the food of love,' 'break the ice with one fell swoop,' you are quoting Shakespeare.

"The seven stages of man" speech probably ranks alongside the advice of Polonius in its presence in anthologies. A further parallel with the advice of Polonius is offered when we see the speech alongside Duke Senior's opening address to his 'co-mates and brothers in exile' at the beginning of the second act of *As You Like It*. Looking at his surroundings the Duke responds,

. . . I smile, and say

There is no flattery: these are Counsellors

That feelingly persuade me what I am . . . (Shakespeare, *As You Like It* 2.1.9-11)

The Duke is thus establishing the sincerity and truth of the counsel given by the natural objects he sees around him. But sincerity is always a slippery concept and here it is already undermined by the curious vocal isolation. Duke Senior is quoting himself. The act of rejecting the false learning of court adversaries, itself a cliché of theatre and politics, would seem to imply learning of greater force but what follows fails to deliver this promise:

Sweet are the uses of adversity,  
which like the toad, ugly and venomous.  
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;  
And this our life, exempt from public haunt  
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks  
Sermons in stones, and good in everything. (2.1.12-7)

Compare this with Jacques's speech, each of the stages precisely denoted by a striking visual-spiritual complex, the last most striking of all. Most earlier stages-of-man-speeches have five components. Jacques extends them to seven, giving evidence of his individual learning as well as extending the strange eventful history and giving it additional power. Jacques is not, of course, learned and neither is he really part of all the social structures of the play. He is one of the earliest forms of the Shakespearean 'outsider' that represents one of the most puzzling components of the canon's larger formation. It is he who, apparently without learning famous literary-visual trope, perhaps in reference to a recent translation of a Latin text, extends it by carefully observed detail and through the addition of a further two stages, ends it with a reference that coolly undermines one of the premises on which the play's situation rests. He is no scholar and his place within the play is marginal. In this, he offers one of the most striking, most destabilizing comments on the place of the scholar within the canon's larger nature and value of learning.

Shakespeare audaciously creates characters and puts pearls of wisdom in their utterances, which have become remarkable expressions of his genius. Jacques's "Seven stages of life," Duke's "Sweet are the uses of adversity," Hamlet's "Frailty thy name is woman" come straight from heart. Portia's speech in *The Merchant of Venice* under the heading "Mercy" delivered in a courtroom where it has no direct legally sanctioned relevance, by a figure who is legally qualified as a female pretending to be male, a pre-adolescent boy. What we are asked to believe, slicing through all these onion skins of performance, is that these words are to be taken seriously as a moral statement. In fact the audience is being asked to shift from a belief in Portia as a woman to Portia as a lawyer to Portia as a Spokesperson for the dramatist as moral philosopher. "Mercy is twice blis": the words get engraved in hearts of listeners and renders, and we are ready to bow our heads in reverence to a great moralist, Shakespeare. The punning combat in *Romeo and Juliet* (Act II, Scene 4) shows Romeo in a new light more than a match for Mercutio after his declaration of love to Juliet. The punning dialogue between Antonio and Sebastian in *The Tempest* mocking Gonzalo, opens to us their characters, their levities showing their lack of gratitude or concern for the kind contrasting with the love, loyalty, and sobriety of Gonzalo.

Many of the expressions created by Shakespeare are immortalized in English literary tradition 'heaven-kissing hill,' 'World without end hour,' 'proud pied April,' double plays like 'green-eyed,' 'laughing stock,' 'Stony hearted,' 'tongue-tied,' 'sea-change,' 'love affair,' and 'green eyed,' to name a few. There are several more phrases scattered throughout his plays and poems.

Some of his phrases have been liberally used as titles for their books by famous authors. For example Faulker chose the phrase ‘sound and fury’ from *Macbeth* as title of one of his novels. Titles of Robert Frost’s poem *Out Out* and Rose Macaulays’ novel *Told by an idiot* are also from *Macbeth*. There are many more phrases from his plays which have been used as titles of their books by their writers. The title of Robert Stone’s book *Dogs of War* has been taken from *Julius Caesar*. So also Lance Hills’s *The Evil That Man Do*, Ogden Nash’s *The Primrose Path*, Dorothy Parker’s *Not So Deep as a Well* are all from Shakespeare. Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, John Steinbeck’s *The Winter of our Discontent*, here too titles are borrowed from Shakespeare’s plays. The list is endless and the process of borrowing continues till today. The treasure of beautiful and intense expressions from Shakespeare’s plays make writers dig into mine of such expressions in his works. No writer in the history of any language has this distinction. Ernest Weekly, the famous etymologist opined that Shakespeare’s contribution to the phraseology of English is ten times greater than that of any other writer to any language in the history of the world, and we as readers feel this to be an understatement. The vastness of vocabulary and the ability to see the relationship between the words is one of the major factors in measuring genius. Shakespeare excelled any other writer in this sphere. His encyclopedic knowledge of science, history, mathematics, classical literature, sociology, psychology, law, Latin, French, politics, music, and art acquired by studying books relating to almost every mental discipline, and observing the habits and style of various people all around him enabled him to draw ideas generously from all those sources for being used as colorful phrases and expression in his plays and drawing universal characters remarkably. This versatility is clearly observed in Shakespeare’s characters that are not ‘types’ struck to the canvas or ‘puppets’ controlled by unseen strings. They are real persons in whom good and evil mingle and who act on their own. Once created, Falstaff, Mercutio, Hotspur, Brutus and Malvolio are not merely characters but they are real human beings, who exercise their will and wisdom. You have to hear only one sentence and you can immediately guess the identity of the speaker. Same is case with Rosalind, Portia, Viola, and Cleopatra. They are women of flesh and blood. Each has separate identity and individual charm. In the entire history of the world, no other dramatist has achieved this unique feat. It is precisely for this reason that you can not take the views of Shakespeare’s characters as his own, though in a few profound passages of some of his plays, this extraordinarily marvelous man might have unguardedly let slip a few personal opinions – in the kaleidoscopically fluctuating moods of Hamlet, in the tempestuous agony of Lear, in the profound mysticism of Prospero, and in the terrifying verdict of a mentally shattered Macbeth who views life as a “Tale told by an idiot/ Full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

The lyrical grandeur of his poetry covers every known figure of speech in the English language, which was known to Shakespeare alone such as Aphorism, Allusion, Alliteration, Allegory, Acronym, Bobast, Caesura, Digression, Epithet, Epimone, Epistrophe, Hyperbole, Irony, Litotes, Metonymy, metaphor, oxymoron, paradox, parallelism, parenthesis, pedantry, personification, pun, repartees, sarcasm, soliloquy, simile, tricolor, Tapinosis. Some of these figures of speeches are so obscure and complex that they are beyond the comprehension of others, including poets like Milton and Keats. It is only now that Shakespearean scholars and critics, poets and ardent grammarians are racking their brains to decode and comprehend them. Some critics regard his too much stress on obscurity and rhyme made him sacrifice grammar and some other critics regard rhyme as a vice of time. Shakespeare’s early verses are regular while the mature style is more varied, powerful, and irregular. *The Tempest*, one of his last works has exact and regular metre. Edward Chappell wrote a long and remarkable essay on Shakespeare’s verse. Chappell’s essay begins from first principles, defining the constituent parts of the verse, voice, pronunciation, time and metre, using stress rather than quantity as the determining factor. He classifies and illustrates Shakespeare’s normal practice in iambic and trochaic and lays stress on his use of pause, and other extra normal features such as ‘the redundant

syllable;’ all of which are explained as licenses taken by Shakespeare in order to give sufficient variety to verse designed for the stage. Samuel Badcock pays glowing tribute to Bard of Avon’s vocabulary as he writes, “The grand characteristic of Shakespeare’s language is energy, an energy which astonishes the imagination” (421). It is felt that science will never be able to explain how the teeming brain of Shakespeare used many of these very complex figures of speech. Such feats of human intellect make us wonder whether Shakespeare was a mere mortal for he seems scarcely human. No wonder that De Quincey wrote “O, mighty poet! Thy works are not as those of other men, simply and merely great works of art; but are also like the phenomena of nature, like the sun and the sea, the stars and the flowers, like frost and the snow, rain and dew, hail-storm and thunder, which are to be studied with entire submission of our own faculties . . .” (“On the Knocking”).

The alchemic process in the crucible of Shakespeare’s brain transmuted emotions like ambition, frustration, jealousy, greed, romantic, love, joy, and sorrow he found all around him in people into the rich gold of his everlasting plays. Hence there is no emotion or activity or situation in the human condition that is not found in his plays. Adman Stephen Baker whose native language is Hungarian and who adopted English, writes “No other language is like it. Nothing even comes close to it in sound, eloquence and just plain common sense.” He further writes “No doubt English was invented in heaven. It must be the lingua franca of the angels” Twisting his observation to suit our context we would be justified in saying that English was in fact invented for Shakespeare. It must be the lingua franca of God himself. Our aim of studying and analyzing Shakespeare’s wide spectrum of content and style is to make us aware of the immortality, universality, and timelessness of his works, and their powerful impact on present scenario. It will make us endeavour for better and save us from a complacent sense of progress. Incomparable Shakespeare shines with his incandescent luminosity through every work he wrote. This can not be said about any other poet or dramatist since the dawn of human civilization.

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