

Paper Mache for 4-18-25 by David Read

It's time once again for my annual homage to one of the great influences in my life, William Shakespeare. In addition to April being National Poetry Month, April 23rd is widely regarded as the date he was born in 1564 as well as the date he died in 1616. I saw something on social media recently that asked, "What was the first Shakespeare play you saw?" I saw a production of "Macbeth" performed at the Inner City Repertory Company in Los Angeles on a high school field trip. It starred Beah Richards as Lady Macbeth thanks to their color blind casting. I wish I could remember who played Macbeth, but it was a white actor. A year later, I played Macbeth in our high school production. I suppose the first Shakespeare I saw on film was the wonderful "Romeo and Juliet" directed by Franco Zeffirelli with the ear worm main theme and starring the beautiful young couple, Leonard Whiting and Olivia Hussey.

It seems that Shakespeare is never far from the headlines and pop culture. The new Broadway production of "Othello" starring Denzel Washington and Jake Gyllenhaal received widespread coverage when it opened. I often see articles about all the words and phrases Shakespeare introduced to the English language. I have mugs, posters and T-shirts with collections of Shakespeare's insults from his plays. And his not so thinly veiled baser, more risqué lines are always entertaining once decoded for modern audiences. Let's look at a few examples in each of these three categories. It is estimated that Shakespeare introduced or popularized over 1,700 words and phrases including assassination, bedazzled, lonely, multitudinous, swagger, laughable, addiction, zany, and majestic. He introduced common expressions like "break the ice," "wild-goose chase," "in a pickle", "It's Greek to me," and "The world's my oyster."

Shakespeare's wrote for everyone from the aristocracy to the poor. To keep them all entertained, he laced his plays with sexual innuendo and double entendre often hidden just beneath the surface of his elegant verse. In "Twelfth Night," Maria refers to Sir Andrew's wit as being "as dry as the remainder biscuit after voyage" - a veiled sexual insult. Shakespeare often used words with multiple meanings, especially those related to anatomy or sexuality. Eric Partridge's classic of Bard scholarship, "Shakespeare's Bawdy," was a great guide for me as I navigated the subtle subtext of the plays. Basically, it was like reading Shakespeare for the hot parts. It includes an alphabetical glossary of words and phrases used in a sexual or scatological sense, with full explanations and cross-references.

Shakespeare was also a grandmaster of the insult. Shakespeare's insults are often cloaked in metaphor, wit, and poetic flair, making them both devastating and entertaining. Here are a few famous Shakespearean insults, full of poetic bite and Elizabethan sass. "Thou art an artless, boil-brained baggage!" "Thou art a pox-marked, puking foot-licker!" "Thou art as fat as butter." "Thine face is not worth sunburning." "More of your conversation would infect my brain." "I do desire we may be better strangers." "Thou art a boil, a plague sore." "I'll beat thee, but I should infect my hands." "There's no more faith in thee than in a stewed prune." "Let's meet as little as we can." You get the idea. Shakespeare turned insults into high art and remain some of the most memorable lines in all of literature. If you are not already a Shakespeare enthusiast, you have a great opportunity to become a novice this weekend by attending one of three remaining performances of "Happy Birthday, Mr. Shakespeare" at The Acting Company. It's a ribald, renaissance festival-esque take on the old boy and is a great way to allow the bard to sink his hooks into you.