

Cultural Daily

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Talk Like Shakespeare Day

Dennis Baron · Wednesday, April 23rd, 2014

Editor's Note: Although this piece was written in 2009, it remains as wonderful today.

Mayor Richard M. Daley, Jr., has [proclaimed](#) April 23, William Shakespeare's 445th birthday, Talk Like Shakespeare Day. Or should that read, "Mayor Richard II hath proclaimed"?

Recent ship hijackings in the Gulf of Aden suggest that this year's Talk Like a Pirate Day (initially scheduled for Sept. 19) may have to be postponed, and the ousting of ex-Gov. Rod Blagojevich, who likes a good literary quote almost as much as he doth protest his innocence too much, has left a hole in Chicago's political discourse which Talk Like Shakespeare Day may help to fill.



Talking like Shakespeare, Royal Shakespeare Company veteran Patrick Stewart asks, "B or not a B?" on Sesame Street

The Chicago Shakespeare Theater has gotten behind this event with a [web page](#) full of talk like Shakespeare resources:

- a list of words that Shakespeare seems to have coined
- some favorite Shakespeare quotes (among them, *the play's the thing*; *what's in a name? Alas, poor Yorick*; and *brave new world*);
- Shakespeare video clips (no, the Bard didn't make videos, but other people like the Beatles and Patrick Stewart have, or as Shakespeare might have put it, have done);
- [a utility](#) that will translate your Twitter messages into Shakespearean tweets
- and even a mask, so you can look like Shakespeare while you talk like him.



You can talk like Shakespeare on Talk Like Shakespeare Day, and you can look like him as well, by printing and then cutting out [this mask](#) (not masque – that's something else).

Mayor Daley wants Chicago's school children to use words like *prithie*, *thou*, *fie*, and *knave* "to celebrate the legacy of his language." Shakespeare may have been the first writer to use the contraction *prithie*, at least in print, but the full phrase *I pray thee* went back to the 1300s. *Fie*, according to the *OED*, was an onomatopoeic word referring to a bad smell. *Knave* meant 'a young

boy,’ ‘a servant,’ and ‘a rogue’ in Shakespeare’s time. And *thou, thee, thy* and *thine* were second-person singular pronouns already giving way to the modern *you, your, and yours*.

Although people will strut around the Loop on April 23 mouthing Shakespearean words like *climature* and *languageless*, and peppering their conversations with quotes from the plays, like *Ay, there’s the rub, Et tu, Brute, and Lay on, Macduff*, the problem with Talk Like Shakespeare Day is that nobody knows what Shakespeare actually talked like.

We know what the characters in Shakespeare’s plays said, but nobody talked like that in real life. Sure, people used words like *methinks*, and *meseems*. They said *abroach, misdemean, and ratherest*. The pronoun *its* was an innovation just starting to appear in Shakespeare’s day (sort of like *you guys* as an innovation in the past 20 years; before *its* people said *it*, without an *s*, or sometimes *his*). But they probably didn’t go around *myching mallico* (making mischief), *leaning toward the nayward* (leaning toward denial, disbelief), or accusing liars of not being *oathable* (trustworthy). And they certainly didn’t use blank verse in ordinary conversation.

Shakespeare wrote some 28,000 different words in his plays (in contrast, the King James Bible, published in 1611, has about 8,000 different words, and the average American high school graduate has a vocabulary of 40,000 – 75,000 words – to paraphrase Bill Clinton, the actual numbers in these word counts depend on what the meaning of the word *word* is). And while some writers have Shakespeare coining as many as 1,500 – 1,700 words, the Folger Shakespeare Library credits him with a little over 500, and the *OED* lists Shakespeare as the first cited author for 247 words, ranging from *airless* and *puppy dog* to *pleached* ‘fenced with interwoven boughs’ and *quatch*, which could mean something like ‘plump,’ although that’s a little uncertain since no one seems to have used the word *quatch* after Shakespeare did (until just now, that is).

When Shakespeare went to the bank he wasn’t all, “Neither a borrower nor a lender be, For loan oft loses both itself and friend,” which is what Polonius tells his son Laertes in *Hamlet*, instead of writing him a check. And when Shakespeare told a friend about a real shipping disaster he probably didn’t call it “a ship of rich lading wrecked on the narrow seas,” the words with which he describes Antonio’s bad fortune in *The Merchant of Venice*. Shakespeare surely didn’t copy the words of the sleepwalking Lady Macbeth and the doctor observing her from any consultation in the office of his own GP:

Lady Macbeth. Here’s the smell of the blood still: all the
perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little
hand. Oh, oh, oh!

....

Doctor. Foul whisperings are abroad: unnatural deeds
Do breed unnatural troubles: infected minds
To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets:
More needs she the divine than the physician.

God, God forgive us all! Look after her;

Remove from her the means of all annoyance,

And still keep eyes upon her. So, good night:

My mind she has mated, and amazed my sight.

I think, but dare not speak.

17th-century patients, like today's, said the equivalent of, "It hurts me here, doc." 17th-century physicians, like today's, didn't like to admit they were stumped. And of course there's the whole doctor-patient confidentiality thing.

We can't be sure what Shakespeare spoke like when he was offstage because no one back then had the technology to capture everyday language and preserve it. Despite Mayor Daley's best intentions, talking like Shakespeare requires more than peppering our conversation with an occasional *thee*, *varlet* or *zounds*, and despite throwing in a "Get thee to a nunnery" or "For this relief much thanks," no one will ever know if they're really talking like Shakespeare.

But that's OK, because, if Shakespeare were alive today in Chicago, he himself wouldn't be talking like Shakespeare – well, he would be talking like Shakespeare, just not like the stereotype we have of the renaissance playwright. Instead, the Bard would be channeling Mayor Daley, or at least, if he were reincarnated as a playwright (though more likely he'd be a YouTube videographer), he'd base his dialogue on the words of *da mair*, even though characters in plays still don't talk onstage the same way they do when they're in the audience, at home, at the doctor's office, or like a lot of Illinois politicians, in jail.



Using age-regression software, an artist with London's Metropolitan Police created an image showing that at 14 the Bard may have looked a lot like Harry Potter.

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