

## St Augustine's Centre, Halifax, UK

### English for Life in the UK

#### Season 2 - Episode 21 - Shakespeare

##### April 2021

Mark Hello, and welcome to the podcast **English for Life in the UK**. This podcast is for those people who want to improve their English by listening to native English speakers talking about a range of subjects and at the same time learn more about life in this country. I'm joined today by John and Sheena. Sheena - how are you?

Sheena Fine, thank you, Mark.

Mark I think you've just come back from being away, haven't you?

Sheena Yes - I've just come back from Shropshire which .... The countryside was lovely, especially because it was so sunny.

Mark Lovely. John - how are you?

John I'm good - hello, Mark, hello, Sheena - and happy St George's day!

Mark That leads us in nicely to today's episode which is mainly going to be about Shakespeare but there's something particular about this date, so we are recording this on 23rd April and John - I think you're going to tell us a bit about why that's a special date.

John Yes - the 23rd of April is the National Day of England because it is the feast day of St George. As well as England, he's also the patron saint of Catalonia, of Georgia, obviously, and various other places. But since the early Middle Ages, he has since been very closely associated with England and particularly Kings of England and the English army, which we will be looking at, in relation to some of Shakespeare's writings later.

St George was originally from what would now be probably modern day Turkey or Syria, in the Middle East, and he was a Christian martyr. So, he was a soldier in the Roman army under the Emperor, Diocletian. Now, Diocletian was the Emperor before Constantine - so, he was an anti-Christian, against the growing Christian faith in the Roman Empire - and the story, or maybe the myth, if you like, is that St George converted to Christianity and refused to give up his faith and he was executed for his Christian faith by Emperor Diocletian. So, throughout the centuries, he's been revered as a Christian martyr and eventually taken on as the patron saint of England.

Mark And what else is there about today's date, then, John?

John Well, it was traditionally believed that our national poet: the Bard<sup>1</sup> of England, William Shakespeare, was born on the 23rd April. I think, Mark, you're going to tell us about that - and Sheena - but it's always .... I've always thought it's a very nice coincidence that probably, well definitely, England's most famous writer - one of England's most famous sons, was born on the Saint's day - the Patron Saint's day of England.

(3 minutes:10 seconds)

Mark Yes - apparently, the evidence of exactly when Shakespeare was born is quite uncertain, and I think Sheena's going to tell us later on a bit about the fact that actually there're quite a few things about Shakespeare we're not absolutely sure about, and one of them, is exactly when he was born. But it has been widely recognised, accepted, that the 23rd April, is regarded as being Shakespeare's birthday, and as you say, John, it fits nicely with the idea that it's also St George's day.

So, Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, which is in the Midlands, in England. He lived there for most of his life, although he did spend a lot of time in London and we'll say more about that later. He was married to Anne Hathaway and he had three children, Susanna, Hamnet and Judith. Hamnet sadly died, quite young, from the plague. But the thing about Shakespeare is that he is almost, without doubt, the most famous playwright in the world and he was very prolific - that means he wrote lots and lots of plays - so again, one of those things we're not absolutely sure of, is exactly how many plays he wrote, personally, but it's somewhere around 38, 39 plays, that were written by Shakespeare. He also wrote 154 sonnets that were published. A sonnet is a poem.

His plays you can broadly categorise into - put them into - three groups. There are the "History Plays", so those are often based around English Kings, but also other historical characters, so some of the most famous ones: Richard III, Henry V, Henry VI, Julius Caesar: all real historical characters that he wrote plays about. Then there are "Comedies" - lots of comedies, he wrote. The most famous - some of the most famous are: *Mid-Summer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado about Nothing*. And then there are a set of plays that are usually called "Tragedies", and the most famous amongst those are *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*.

His .. He wrote in a style of language at the time from that historical period, but his plays have been both modernised and translated into more than 75 different languages and Shakespeare is read and studied and performed in countries all around the world these days. So, I found out, for example, that the play *Romeo and Juliet* was performed in 24 different countries in the last 10 years and, of course, many of these plays have also been made into films and TV programmes as well.

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<sup>1</sup> traditionally a 'bard' was a story teller and poet. Shakespeare is often called 'the Bard' because he is England's best known story teller and poet.

So, Sheena, tell us a little bit about what you've been looking at about Shakespeare and a bit about your favourite plays.

(7:07)

Sheena OK - thank you Mark. I've been reading a little bit more about his background, and discovered that, actually, he is a little bit of a mystery, even though he might be our most famous poet and playwright. We don't know an awful lots of facts about his life and even what he looks like.

We've got a few different portraits of him: one that's in the National Gallery, but that's quite a dull portrait; it's called the Chandos portrait. And we're not even sure whether that really was him, but recently, there's a new portrait that's come to light, and that's called the Cobbe portrait and that was ... it was some, it was in some aristocratic house, in Dublin, and it's emerged, more recently that this probably was an authentic painting of Shakespeare and, in this one, he is quite dashing<sup>2</sup> - his clothing is quite fancy, so we see Shakespeare at his most successful.

In Stratford, as you mentioned where he was born, we have Shakespeare's school, we have houses, and the church where he was baptised and where his tomb is. Thank goodness we're left with his words and his texts<sup>3</sup>. And we're very lucky to have that, because of all the texts - all the plays that were written - which is about 30,000 plays, between the opening of the first theatre in London and then, when they were shut down 60-70 years later by the Puritans<sup>4</sup> - of those 30,000 titles, only 230 have survived and of those, are the 38 or 39 plays of Shakespeare.

The other thing that was lucky about Shakespeare was the fact that when he went to London, to be an actor and a playwright, the theatre was just starting in London. Before that, kings, queens, aristocrats, would have their own troupe of players and actors, but the first theatres were being built and they were so popular, they were desperate for new writers - as well as actors, but writers - so he hit<sup>5</sup> London at just ... just the right time. So, lots and lots of theatres were built - one of them being the Globe, of course, that is still ... a reproduction of the Globe Theatre - is there, in London today, so we can see what the theatre looked like, in Shakespeare's time.

In his time - the reason they needed so many plays, was that they had to attract up to 2000 spectators a day to make ... to make the theatre successful, and they would put on, each time, 5 or 6 different plays a week. So you can understand why a playwright like Shakespeare, who was so versatile, could write plays that appealed to a massive, massively different audience - was so popular. And the plays at the time, I think, it's

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<sup>2</sup> dashing - meaning stylish, or attention-seeking;

<sup>3</sup> texts - his writings

<sup>4</sup> Puritans - the regime briefly in power (less than 20 years) after the English Civil War, strict and austere in society.

<sup>5</sup> hit London - arrived in London

interesting - they didn't have scenery - they didn't have electricity, so they would be performed at 2 o'clock, in the afternoon. Trumpets would announce the start of the play. People would pay. People would come from all classes. The poorest of people, even labourers - many, many labourers would take time off work to go to see Shakespeare's plays. And they would pay a penny. If they were standing - if they were a "groundling" - that stood on the ground, they would pay one penny; they would pay an extra penny if they wanted a seat; and an extra penny again, if they wanted a cushion. And, inside the theatre, they could buy refreshments like apples and pears and if they didn't like the performance, they would throw these apples and pears at the performers.

(11:25)

So, the plays had to be really good and they had to have a vast appeal to all different sections of society and I would say that Shakespeare was very, very good at doing that - at having this wide appeal and that is why he's still around today and so popular.

Mark So what are your ... what are your personal favourites, Sheena?

Sheena It's hard to say - because, as you said, there are so many different versions of each of his plays - set in different times with different directors and costumes. I think - I know John likes the History plays - and I think one of my first favourite History plays was *Richard II* (the second). I just ... I enjoyed studying that at school and then I was lucky to see it at Stratford with David Tennant (who plays Doctor Who - or did play Doctor Who - on the TV). So the play was really popular with young people, because they knew David Tennant from the TV series, and they came to Stratford to see him in a play and they really enjoyed seeing him, I think. And they also came in their droves<sup>6</sup> to see him in *Hamlet*. So, someone who is known to a young audience was playing these important Shakespeare roles.

Another play that I love is *Macbeth* and we've been studying that with St Augustine's students who, I think, have enjoyed the story - and then, we've had a look at some of the language each week, as well, so it's given us chance to look a bit more deeply at some of Shakespeare's language. Last week we were looking at the phrase when Lady Macbeth tells Macbeth to

"look like the innocent flower but be the serpent underneath it"

and hiding the fact that he was about to kill the king. I think that what Shakespeare is so good at - I think choosing the right language is his gift and ... but a gift that keeps on giving<sup>7</sup>.

Mark John - is there a particular play you want to talk about?

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<sup>6</sup> came in their droves - came in huge numbers

<sup>7</sup> gift that keeps on giving - though the gift is Shakespeare's - his writing talent - it keeps on "giving" because so many other people are able to enjoy the result of his talents.

John Not particularly fond of the "Comedies". I don't know - perhaps ...I think comedy is a difficult thing - I think it dates<sup>8</sup>, doesn't it? Things that people found funny or entertaining sometimes, 100 years ago or 50 years ago even, don't always survive. Personally, I'm very interested in history, so I've always been more interested, as Sheena says, in the "History plays". I think it's fascinating when we look at his life. He was writing for the most part of his life in Elizabethan England so he was subject to censorship, which is an important thing to remember. All his plays had to go in front of a man called 'the Master of the Revels' - so if there was anything ... and, we have to remember, and we've done podcasts on this period - this was when the Protestant faith and Elizabeth's government, the Tudors were ... still had quite a shaky grip on power. There was still a lot of religious animosity<sup>9</sup>, there was the Spanish Armada, so he was kind of writing .. to some degree, some of his work could be seen as propaganda<sup>10</sup>, perhaps, for the Tudors, and for the current regime.

But I do love the way that he writes about history and when we look back at people, especially like Richard III [the third] and Henry V [the fifth] - it's almost impossible for us now, in contemporary Britain, to imagine them without imagining them the way that Shakespeare related them to us. So when we think of ... don't we? ... Laurence Olivier playing Richard III, and he's hunched over and he's quite evil. Or we think, perhaps, of, you know, Henry V at the Battle of Agincourt and the famous ... the famous lines of Shakespeare's and for historians, it's kind of served a very interesting and useful purpose, because when he writes about the 1400s - about the fifteenth century - about things, like Agincourt and the War of the Roses - what we can't assume is ... and what we don't know ... is intent. We know what happened - we know the dates of the battles, we know when kings and queens died - but it's very difficult to look at and say what their intentions were and the scheming and the things behind the scenes, and Shakespeare illustrates that wonderfully and gives us - fills in the blanks, I think, to some degree. That's the side of Shakespeare that I've always been interested in.

(16:26)

Mark We have mentioned already that it's maybe worth saying that, of course, very often these days, directors will take a Shakespearean play, set in his original, Elizabethan times, and will translate it into modern times, so ...I think one of the most famous is the musical *West Side Story* is actually based around the Romeo and Juliet story, originally from Shakespeare and then became completely .. a new story but with some of the ideas that originally came from that original play.

John He's still played a very important political role throughout the centuries - even into the twentieth century. The famous film interpretation of *Henry V*, starring Laurence Olivier, in the leading role, was released in 1944, just a few weeks before the allied invasion of

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<sup>8</sup> it dates - another way of saying "it goes out of date", goes out of fashion, loses popularity.

<sup>9</sup> animosity means a strong dislike or hatred

<sup>10</sup> propaganda is the spreading of information (sometimes false or distorted) in support of a particular cause

Europe<sup>11</sup>. So you were looking back to the fifteenth century, an English army going to war on the continent, against a continental foe, and that were [*was*] very much seen as being effectively a tool of propaganda, during World War II. We were looking back to these ancient heroes and they were translated into a modern propaganda tool. So he's always stayed relevant, hasn't he, Mark?

Mark Yes - on the language side, as well. There are, of course, a lot of words, a lot of phrases, from Shakespeare's plays, that have found their way into everyday use. What we call "**idioms**" that are used in a regular way, in the English language, now, but which originated in Shakespeare. There are a lot of them, but I think we're just going to mention one or two of them each. Sheena - have you got one you are going to choose?

Sheena Back to *Macbeth* again - "**vanish into thin air**" this is what Macbeth says, when the witches just seem to disappear. And we use it now when we're looking for someone - if you are in a shop and you've lost someone and you say:

"I don't know where they've gone! They've just vanished into thin air".

When we say that, we are directly quoting Shakespeare and Macbeth.

Mark Great. John?

John I'm back to *Henry V* (the fifth) again, and it's a phrase, it's an idiom that you'll hear people use all the time: that's "**a heart of gold**" - we'll say that about somebody if they're a good person and if they're a kind person. And that is in, I think, Act IV, Scene I, when Henry the King, disguises himself as an ordinary soldier and he goes amongst the soldiers and asks them what they think of the King, to which one of them replies:

"I think the King has a heart of gold"

So that's one of my favourites.

Mark That's lovely. Well, I was going to choose - and I don't know exactly where it comes in the play - but "**love is blind**". It comes from *The Merchant of Venice*. And the idea of 'love is blind' is that when people are in love, sometimes they will do stupid things, they will behave in a completely different way, they will do things that you wouldn't expect them to do, because love has blinded them.

Sheena I think that is in a lot of Shakespeare's plays like *A Midsummer's Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*, about people in love, acting rashly<sup>12</sup>.

John So, as Mark pointed out, we think that Shakespeare was born on the 23rd April and that was in 1564. Unfortunately, for poor old William, he died on the 23rd April 1616, aged 52, So very unluckily, died on his own birthday.

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<sup>11</sup> allied invasion of Europe during the 2nd world war - the allies included the U.K., USA, Canada, Australia and the French resistance

<sup>12</sup> acting rashly - acting on instinct, rather than stopping to reflect or think a situation through before responding

Mark So another reason for us to recognise this date that we're recording this podcast.

John It's also World Book Day - for the same reason. Because the Spanish writer, Cervantes died on the same date, as well. So that date was ... The two great .. the great English writer and the great Spanish writer - that date was chosen for World Book day.

(20:52)

Mark **Language Support**

This is the part of the podcast where I choose some aspect of the English language from this episode and talk about it in a bit more detail.

So, today, I'm going to choose "**idioms**". So we talked about the fact that in Shakespeare, there are a lot of idioms. So what is an idiom? **An idiom is a group of words, in an particular order, that have a meaning that's different from the meaning of each word on their own.** They exist in most languages and they are phrases that come into common use.

So we chose three Shakespeare idioms that are still used today and I thought I'd give you another three:

So, the idea of a '**wild goose chase**': this comes in *Romeo and Juliet* and this is ....if you say "someone has been sent on a wild goose chase" it means a "pointless exercise" - something that's not going to produce anything useful at the end of it.

Then, the idea of somebody being "**a laughing stock**". This comes from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and it comes from the old idea that people used to be put in what were called "stocks"<sup>13</sup> where your head and your hands were trapped in this wooden stock, and people would throw things at them and so - ... and laugh at them .. and so today, we don't use stocks - but if somebody does something foolish or silly, we might say, they're becoming 'a laughing stock'.

And then, thirdly, from Shakespeare - the idea of being "**faint-hearted**" - this comes from *Henry IV* [the fourth] and it means being timid - lacking courage. To be 'faint-hearted' - to lack courage.

So - those are three more Shakespearean idioms. There are hundreds and I would encourage you to spot them, collect them, look them up, so they will be useful for your every-day English.

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<sup>13</sup> people were put in stocks - in a public location, as a community punishment for slight infractions of the law, or 'anti-social' behaviour.

I'm going to give you a few more - these don't come from Shakespeare. But, for example, you can say: "**don't beat around the bush**". Now, to 'beat around the bush' means to avoid saying what you mean. So, if you want to say "no, I don't want to do that" - just, say that - don't use lots of different words or ways of saying ... when what you really mean is "no". So don't beat around the bush.

And then, almost the other side of that, is the phrase "**bite the bullet**". To 'bite the bullet' means to get something difficult or unpleasant over with - to get it done quickly, bite the bullet, to get on with it.

Two more for you - "**go back to the drawing board**": a drawing board is, literally, a board or a piece of paper on which people used to draw things and still do, these days, and to 'go back to the drawing board' means to start over again, because when you do something on a drawing board you are usually planning - in the early stages of doing something - so, to go back to the drawing board means let's start over again - let's rethink about what we're trying to do.

And, finally - "**it's not rocket science**". Rocket science is obviously making rockets to go up into space and the science behind how they work and that is a very complex and high-level skill. If something is 'not rocket science' then actually it means it's pretty easy - it's pretty easy to do, not particularly difficult - "it's not rocket science".

That's it, for this week. I hope you've found that useful. If you want to get hold of the transcript or find out more about other episodes and the work that we do, stay listening for the links to the website and our email address. Otherwise, we will see you again very soon. Goodbye for now.

(25:53)

You can find the transcript - that's the written version of this episode - on our website:

**[www.staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk](http://www.staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk)**

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We also have an email address - that's **[englishforlifeintheUK@gmail.com](mailto:englishforlifeintheUK@gmail.com)**

And we would love to hear from you - your thoughts on our podcast and ideas for the future.

We also have a Twitter account : **[@EsoiSaint](https://twitter.com/EsoiSaint)**

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**(28:22) Ends**