

Brittin Ward

The King's College

The Founders' Scholarship

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The House of Shakespeare

William Shakespeare changed the world through the thumbprint he left on the English language. Shakespeare invented over 2,000 new words, transformed the English theatre, and shaped the intellects that founded nations, formed governments and fought for civil liberties. His words continue to inspire a Biblical worldview, engage contemporary culture, and prepare leaders. There has been no other writer like him in history, and his words carry a strength and beauty that civilization has considered second only to the Bible. His words are not merely beautiful; they offer profound insights into daily life. Shakespeare's plays spawn greatness.

Current scholarship often mistakenly assumes that Shakespeare's work is comprised of immoral carnality, and that his life was a reflection of hedonism. History tells us a different story. William Shakespeare was born to a wealthy landowner in Stratford during the April of 1564. He died a wealthy Stratford landowner in April 1616, and is buried inside the chancel of Holy Trinity Church in Stratford.

Elizabethan education required immense amounts of memorization; in fact, something new had to be memorized every day (Rowse 41). He would have memorized massive amounts of Latin poetry and Scripture, both of which frequently appear in his plays. Famous Shakespeare biographer A.L. Rowse writes, "Of all Shakespeare's 'sources' the Bible and the Prayer Book come first and are the most constant. Altogether

there are definite allusions to forty-two books of the Bible...It has been estimated that Shakespeare's Biblical range is far greater than that of any contemporary dramatist" (41). In his book *Shakespeare's Biblical Knowledge*, scholar R. Noble writes that "Above all Shakespeare quoted the Psalms...from first to last there is not a play in the folio entirely free from a suggestion of the Psalms" (47). His company, along with his plays, reflects the virtues taught in the Bible.

Shakespeare's friends and the compilers of the first folio, James Heminges and Henry Condell, were both churchwardens, and Augustine Phillips, a leading actor in Shakespeare's company, was a long time member of the Anglican Church as were virtually all of the company members (Mutschmann and Wentersdorf 117-118). As the celebrated author Marchette Chute said, "Even the enemies of the acting profession were obliged to admit that some actors were 'sober, discreet, properly learned, honest householders, and citizens well thought of among their neighbors.' The description is an excellent one of the men of Shakespeare's company, who lived quietly and worked hard and saved their brilliance for the stage rather than for taverns and dice" (24).

Shakespeare and the actors in the company he was part of were honest, hardworking men. Ben Jonson, court poet and friend of Shakespeare, wrote that "he was honest, and of an open and free nature" with "brave notions and gentle expressions" (Kastan 9). Using these brave notions and gentle expressions, Shakespeare was able to create masterpieces. His works inspire the mind, infuse the soul, and bring to light the passion which burns in mankind's heart.

The principles and ideals in Shakespeare's plays are a reflection of Biblical teachings, whether it be marriage in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, forgiveness in

Cymbeline, chastity in *Romeo and Juliet*, or honor in *Henry V*. One example of Shakespeare's Biblical themes can be found in the first scene of the first act of *The Merchant of Venice*, where Shakespeare alludes to the dangers of anger in Mathew 5:22 "But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment" (Shakespeare, *Merchant* I.i.98). Another instance can be found in *Cymbeline*, when one of Shakespeare's characters says, "The power that I have on you is to spare you; the malice towards you to forgive you. Live, and deal with others better" (Shakespeare, *Cymbeline* V.v.419). These two illustrations provide insight into what separated Shakespeare from other authors; his ability to combine Biblical understanding and his own words to fire the hearts of men.

Understanding Shakespeare's writing illuminates his influence on leaders like The King's College house namesakes, particularly Winston Churchill. During the greatest war of our time, WWII, Winston Churchill was a source of strength and inspiration to the Allied forces; and William Shakespeare was a source of strength and inspiration to him. Churchill often quoted Shakespeare, and his soldiers were so inspired by his love of Shakespeare, that one particular English parachute commander quoted *Henry V* as he entered his plane (Ismay 357). Once, while ending a staff meeting, Churchill closed with a quote from *Julius Caesar* saying, "There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune, omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries. On such a full sea are we now afloat, and we must take the current when it serves or lose our ventures" (Lehrman). Churchill realized the ability Shakespeare's words had to sway the minds of men, and used it to save his nation.

Another house namesake, and one of the strongest women in history, Queen Elizabeth I was the patron of Shakespeare's theater company. The Queen, having been well educated, could and did fully appreciate Shakespeare's greatness. One celebrated Shakespeare historian writes, "It is noticeable that during Elizabeth's reign the dramatists never wrote anything condoning or encouraging sexual immorality (Chutte 146). This was one of the reasons the Queen enjoyed and appreciated Shakespeare so much: the fact that Shakespeare's plays encouraged chastity in maidens, and honor in gentlemen.

Shakespeare's legacy travels also into the hearts of American leaders. Arguably the greatest President the United States has ever had, Abraham Lincoln, grew up reading Shakespeare. The works of Shakespeare were the cornerstone of Lincoln's education, and throughout his life, Lincoln cherished the words of the Bard (Dickey). Indeed, Mr. Lincoln, "read Shakespeare more than all other writers together" wrote aide John Hay (Lehrman). Lincoln, the man that held America together during Civil War, put great value in reading Shakespeare, and while at the White House, he always kept a copy of Shakespeare close at hand (Edelstein). Lincoln understood the significance of Shakespeare's plays, and was affected deeply by their power. There is another, more contemporary, civil rights champion who depended upon Shakespeare.

Locked away in solitary confinement, Nelson Mandela and fellow inmates felt the same power emanating from Shakespeare's words. They took turns reading from a book with Hindu goddesses on the cover, but disguised inside the cover was a complete works of Shakespeare. Reading Shakespeare's plays was vital for Mandela. As Sheena McKenzie says, "The historic text became a source of strength for Mandela and his

fellow inmates during their darkest days”. Something about Shakespeare’s words carried enough force to make hopeful even prisoners locked in solitary confinement. Conversely, in the vast freedom of the American West, Shakespeare’s words held equal power.

That “something” struck a deep chord in the famous mountain man, Jim Bridger’s heart. Despite being illiterate, Bridger once exchanged a yoke of valuable oxen for a volume of Shakespeare. He then hired a local farm boy to read the words aloud for him and could thereafter be heard quoting Shakespeare to his comrades. This man opened the Oregon Trail and brought Shakespeare to the American West.

Like Bridger, American President John F. Kennedy loved listening to Shakespeare. The President held evenings full of Shakespeare presentations, and invited actors from the American Shakespeare Company to put on scenes from *Henry V* (*Shakespeare in American Life*). The famous “Crispin’s Day Speech” from *Henry V* was most likely Kennedy’s favorite, and his wife invited actor Basil Rathbone to recite it at another White House dinner (Kennedy). In fact, Kennedy’s wife often spontaneously recited the speech for him (Kennedy). John F. Kennedy, as the youngest president elected to office, must have felt a deep kinship to the young King Henry; both men faced older, much more powerful adversaries who sought supremacy.

Shakespeare’s works have helped leaders found new nations, fight battles, and inspire greatness. Shakespeare is the ideal candidate for an 11th house at King’s. His words inspire humanity to live up to its full potential. Through his immortal words, Shakespeare reminds us of our raw humanity, opens our eyes to the beauties of life, and inspires us with his deep spiritual insights. Sir Isaac Newton once said that he could only

see so far because he stood on the shoulders of giants. Giants stood on the shoulders of Shakespeare.

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