
The Most Important Characteristics of Shakespearean Idioms and their Meanings

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Annotation: The article deals with Shakespeare phrases and idioms – all of the phrases Shakespeare invented when writing his many works. As if all of the words Shakespeare invented were not enough, he also frequently put common words together to make up phrases new to the English language. While most people in the English-speaking world are aware of at least a handful of famous Shakespeare quotes and phrases, what's less well known is the number of Shakespeare phrases still in common usage today.

Abstract: Back in the 16th century, if one wanted to succeed as a playwright, not only did they have to write plays that were going to appeal to both the highborn and the lowborn, but they also had to write them on various topics. Even nowadays, that implies that one has to be well versed in topics such as history, politics, law, warfare, religion and culture as well as the daily life of the community and country in which they live. Thus, it is only logical to assume that their vocabulary is vast and due to the fact that Shakespeare wrote plays on all of these topics it may be said that he was indeed such a person. However, David Crystal claims that this is exactly what makes people believe that Shakespeare wrote “a quarter, a third, a half...of all the words in the English language” (Crystal, 2008, p. 8). Unlike some authors who invented most if not all the words in languages for their fantasy worlds, this is, of course, not the case with Shakespeare, because the English language had existed for ages prior to the year of his birth, which means he simply used the version of the language that was spoken at the time and which is now known today as Early Modern English.

Keywords: William Shakespeare, idioms, phrases, origin, cultural significance, idiomatic expressions, properties of idioms, ethnography, etymology of idioms, mythology.

Introduction

Shakespearean idioms are so common that you likely use many of them without knowing they came from the famous playwright. Though Shakespeare died almost 400 years ago, his legacy lives on in the rich language he used throughout his plays and poetry. Many Shakespearean phrases are still used today, and not just in high school readings of Romeo and Juliet.

When we talk about ‘Shakespeare phrases’ we mean the many sayings, idioms and phrases that Shakespeare invented that are still in common usage today. It's unlikely that native English speakers are able to get through a day without using one or more Shakespeare sayings in one way or another, without even thinking about it.

When one takes a look at a sample of text that was written by Shakespeare many a century ago, they cannot fail to notice that the syntax, semantics, word order and vocabulary of his English are to some extent different than the ones that are in use today. However, by having written his plays and sonnets, William Shakespeare has made a tremendous impact on

Present-Day English, especially on its vocabulary. Naturally, even though not all the words that can be found in his work are in use today, some of them have been naturalized into the language, without people even being aware that they were either produced or recorded by arguably the most famous English playwright. On the other hand, there are some phrases and idioms which people can still ascribe to him even though they are not likely to either utter them in day-to-day speech or write them in a private message, unless they want to quote Shakespeare to prove some point by using “old language” or simply to show off. The rest of these phrases have faded into oblivion and can only be found on the pages of his plays or heard in either a movie adaptation or live on stage at various theatres.

Deciding which ones of many Shakespearean idioms belong to which category is not at all simple, because many factors have to be taken into consideration, such as how they ought to be grouped, classified, sampled, analyzed etc. Due to the significance of these phrases and idioms, the aim of this research will be to find out how often certain Shakespearean idioms and phrases are used in Present-Day English and various contexts in which they appear. Due to the fact that Shakespeare was famous for his insults, exclamations and metaphorical idioms, those groups of idioms ought to be taken into consideration. However, because of the fact that all languages change overtime and the fact that four-hundred-year-old texts are the ones under close scrutiny, it ought to be safe to assume that many of those verbal insults, exclamations as well as some metaphorical idioms penned by Shakespeare are no longer used in Present-Day English. Hence, most of the phrases and idioms that are going to be considered for this analysis fall into the category of famous Shakespearean multi-word idioms, while there are also some idioms that may not be thought to be Shakespearean but that are nevertheless found in his works. Naturally, some of the idioms in question contain a couple of archaic words, while some are only comprised of words that can be heard and used on a daily basis, which is why these two linguistic traits are to be selected as the most important criteria when grouping these idioms. Even though many of 3 Shakespeare’s famous idioms should be quite frequent in Present-Day English, this can and should be checked through corpus research. Moreover, it should be noted if they are more present in one variety of English than the other. This is why the two most important varieties of English have been selected for this research: British and American English. Hence, the aim of this paper is to find out how Shakespearean idioms are used in Present-Day English. This will be done by checking whether Shakespearean idioms are more frequent in British or in American English, and by checking whether people use such idioms only when they want to quote Shakespeare or in other, more natural, situations as well. Based on this, the hypothesis is that they will be more frequent in British English because of the fact that Shakespeare was an English playwright who was born and bred in Stratford-upon-Avon and the assumption that the British would be keen on preserving his legacy by using his idioms in day-to-day speech. The second hypothesis is that people will either utter or write such idioms more often when they want to quote Shakespeare rather than use them in day-to-day speech which, in turn, should imply that they have been successfully incorporated into the language that is used nowadays. In order to establish whether this is true or false, it will be determined how often Shakespeare is credited as the person who either coined or used a certain idiom as well as to see in what ways these idioms appear in sentences that are not considered to be quotes or if they appear in such sentences at all.

Main part

You may be shocked that there are so many **Shakespeare idioms** still being used today. William Shakespeare actually created or made famous a huge number of expressions, but here we have carefully selected and explained the most popular ones. We’re going to show how they can be used and give you the original source from Shakespeare’s plays, in case you’re interested in reading more about the context.

Take a look through these **idioms from Shakespeare** and you'll soon be a thespian without even realizing it.

If you want to learn more about the famous English writer William Shakespeare, feel free to read about him. He was quite extraordinary. You can also learn more about what idioms are and how to use them.

➤ **A laughing stock**

To be a **laughing stock** means you did something funny or embarrassing that could make you an object of ridicule.

*"I can't believe the waitress dropped all the plates. She was the **laughing stock** of the restaurant."*

*"Well that professor was a right **laughing stock**! I've never been so bored."*

Origin: The Merry Wives of Windsor (act 1 scene 2) "Pray you let us not be laughing stocks to other men's humors: I desire you in friendship, and I will one way or other make you amends. "

Listen carefully when you hear this idiom from Shakespeare. It is often used in a derogatory way, meaning that the person in question is the opposite of funny. It's not necessarily a compliment about your comedic skills!

➤ **A pound of flesh**

You may find that Shakespeare idioms change over time. This one is nothing to do with the actual flesh of a person nowadays, although this was exactly what Shakespeare meant when he wrote it!

This expression is about getting what is owed to you. Of course, in life, it's fair that you get what is rightly yours. However, if you do so without consideration or care for how it may affect the other person, regardless of the consequences, you could be described as getting a **pound of flesh**.

"He was so angry; he just didn't care. He really wanted a pound of flesh no matter what."

Origin: The Merchant of Venice "Be nominated for an equal pound of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken in what part of your body pleases me."

➤ **All that glistens is not gold**

Here's another William Shakespeare idiom from the play "The Merchant of Venice." It's in reference to the shiny precious metal gold. To say that **all that glistens is not gold** is to say that even though something looks good or valuable, it may not be.

"I just couldn't believe it. The job seemed perfect, but as they say – all that glistens isn't gold."

Origin: The Merchant of Venice (act 2 scene 7) "There is a written scroll. I'll read the writing. All that glistens is not gold. Often have you heard that told?"

You may hear the word *glitters* replacing *glistens*, as over the years people have misheard or adapted this saying from Shakespeare's writing.

➤ **As luck would have it**

Although this idiom was around long before Shakespeare used it, it was made popular by him. Nowadays we simply say **as luck would have it**, but originally this adverbial phrase included the word *good*. Simply put, it just refers to how chance, fate or destiny plays a big part in our life.

“I arrived late at the train station, but as luck would have it, the train was also running late – so I managed to still catch it.”

The Merry Wives of Windsor (act 3 scene 5) “You shall hear. As good luck would have it in comes in one Mistress Page;”

➤ **Be all and end all**

If you want to express that something is crucial or important, or perhaps highlight that the statement is the end of the conversation or situation, try this Shakespearean idiom; the **be all and end all**.

“Winning that award was the be all and end all for him.”

Origin: Macbeth (act 1 scene 7) “Might be the be-all and end-all – here”

Did you know that Macbeth is often referred to as “The Scottish Play” in theater circles? Find out why in our article about British idioms.

➤ **Break the ice**

You may have heard of ‘Icebreakers’, which are ships that literally sail through frozen seas to **break the ice** and make it safe for other ships. As an expression, it’s used when new people meet each other and have to introduce themselves to one another.

“Allow me to break the ice and introduce myself.”

Origin: The Taming of the Shrew (act 1 scene 2) “and if you break the ice and do the feat”

➤ **Clothes make(th) the man**

Should this one be on this list? Shakespeare didn’t actually write these words as you’ll see the in the origin below. However, the phrase we use today is said to have come from him.

To say the **clothes, make the man** means that people may judge you for the way you look, you may judge someone by how they dress, or you should dress to impress.

“You’ve got a job interview tomorrow. Wear the blue suit as clothes make the man.”

Origin: Hamlet (act 1 scene 3) “The apparel oft proclaims the man”

➤ **Cold comfort**

Here’s another expression that he may have not invented, but did make famous. When you heard something that brings you very little to no reassurance, encouragement or relief, it can be described as a **cold comfort** to you.

“The news that unleaded petrol prices are going down will be a cold comfort for those with diesel cars.”

Origin: Taming of the Shrew and King John

➤ **All the world’s a stage**

As part of a well-known monologue, **all the world is a stage** has quite a deep meaning.

Shakespeare was simply comparing the world to a stage, the people to actors, and the varied stages of a person’s life to the acts in a play. For example, an actor entering the stage is like a person being born and entering the world. And actors leave the stage just as people die and leave the earth!

“You should go for it, take the chance. As they say, all the world’s a stage.”

Origin: As You Like It (act 2 scene 7) “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.”

However, some feel this idiom has changed its meaning over the years. It has been used in different ways by Oscar Wilde and by Allan Moore in the novel *V for Vendetta*, to name just two examples. It now could imply that people are always watching you, or that you play different roles at different stages in your life.

Also consider the growth of social media and the fact that people really are acting for the whole world to watch. Perhaps this Shakespearean saying could be described more as a metaphor than an idiom in this context?

Everyday Phrases That Actually Came from Shakespeare

Whether a fan or not though, you probably use many of Shakespeare's phrases on a regular basis. In fact, we say or write some of these so often, they've become cliches.

➤ **"Green-eyed Monster"**

Meaning: jealousy.

In "Othello," Iago describes jealousy as a monster which devours its source.

"Oh, beware, my lord, of jealousy!

It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock

The meat it feeds on" (Act 3, Scene 3).

In this case, Iago uses romance as an example. He thinks a man would rather know his wife is cheating than suspect her without proof.

➤ **"In a pickle"**

Meaning: a difficult or uncomfortable situation.

In "The Tempest," King Alonso asks his jester, Trinculo, "How camest thou in this pickle?" (In modern language, "how did you get so drunk?")

The drunk Trinculo responds, "I have been in such a pickle since I saw you last ..." (Act 5, Scene 1).

Trinculo's drinking does cause trouble for him, the way we use the phrase today. Shakespeare's original intent makes sense though. Many pickling processes use alcohol.

➤ **"The world is your oyster."**

Meaning: being in a position to take advantage of life's opportunities.

In "The Merry Wives of Windsor," Falstaff refuses to lend Pistol any money. Pistol retorts, "Why, then the world's mine oyster, which I with sword will open" (Act 2, Scene 2).

Since Falstaff won't help him financially, Pistol vows to obtain his fortune using violent means.

We've dropped the angry undertones for modern use.

➤ **"Catch a cold"**

Meaning: to get sick.

In "Cymbeline," one of Shakespeare's lesser-known plays, Iachimo says to Posthumous Leonatus, "We will have these things set down by lawful counsel, and straight away for Britain, lest the bargain should catch cold and starve ..." (Act 1, Scene 4).

In other words, if the deal takes too long, it will fall apart. Shakespeare created the idea of "cold" causing illness for the first time.

➤ **"It's all Greek to me."**

Meaning: that something is indistinguishable or incomprehensible.

In "Julius Caesar," when Cassius asks Casca what Cicero said, Casca responds, "But, for mine own part, it was Greek to me" (Act 1, Scene 2).

Cassius didn't understand because he doesn't speak Greek. The phrase has obviously morphed and expanded its meaning.

➤ **"Love is blind"**

Meaning: an inability to see shortcomings in a lover; doing crazy things when in love.

In the "The Merchant of Venice," Jessica disguises herself as a boy just to see her beloved, Lorenzo. Needless to say, she feels a little silly but simply has to see him.

"But love is blind, and lovers cannot see
The pretty follies that themselves commit ..." (Act 2, Scene 6)

➤ **"Wild goose chase"**

Meaning: a hopeless and never-ending pursuit.

In "Romeo and Juliet," Romeo makes a play on words comparing his shoe to his penis, and Mercutio can't compete with Romeo's wit. He tells Romeo to stop joking, but Romeo implores his friend to continue — an impossible feat in Mercutio's mind.

Mercutio says, "Nay, if our wits run the wild-goose chase, I am done, for thou hast more of the wild-goose in one of thy wits than, I am sure, I have in my whole five" (Act 2, Scene 4).

➤ **"A heart of gold"**

Meaning: a very kind or honorable person.

In "Henry V," King Henry disguises himself as a commoner, and Pistol, unaware of the King's true identity, speaks to him. When the King asks if he considers himself a better man than the king, Pistol says, "The king's a bawcock, and a heart of gold, a lad of life, an imp of fame ..." (Act 4, Scene 1).

➤ **"Break the ice"**

Meaning: to start conversation.

"And if you break the ice, and do this feat,
Achieve the elder, set the younger free ..." (Act 1, Scene 2).

In the "The Taming of The Shrew," Baptista Minola has two daughters: a sassy one and a modest, beautiful one — the younger daughter. He refuses to let any suitors even speak to his younger daughter until his older daughter marries. Tranio (as Lucentio) suggests that another man marry the older daughter, so he can try to win the younger one's affection.

Conclusion

For us, Shakespeare is not just a loud, bright name, which is worshipped only occasionally and from afar; he became our property, he entered our flesh and blood." – I. S. Turgenev

It's impossible to forget the great English poet and playwright of the Renaissance. He made a considerable contribution not only to the development of English literature and drama but also to the English language itself. All in all one thing is certain: Shakespearean idioms are present in one way or another in Present-Day English. Some of them are more frequent in one variety of English while some of them appear more frequently in the other, and how frequently they appear usually depends on what type of idiom they are, what context they are written or uttered in and how well incorporated they are into the Contemporary English Language

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