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THE CREATION MYTHS OF STRATFORD-UPON-ASPEN,
OR, SHAKESPEARE IS QUOTING US

Abstract: For years, people have claimed that Shakespeare had a prodigious vocabulary, and coined a great many common words and phrases. Modern scholarship is showing these claims to be exaggerations. One popular essay by Bernard Levin is particularly influential in claiming that whenever we utter any of 62 common phrases, we are “quoting Shakespeare.” This paper sets out to investigate these phrases, finding that fewer than a third of them are attested first in Shakespeare’s writings. It goes on to identify a few more exaggerated claims for Shakespeare as a coiner of phrases, and to explore the questions of why people tend to attribute so many phrases to him, and what consequences this has, especially regarding intellectual elitism. It concludes that most of the phrases are proverbial, that they should be considered folklore, and that they are the common heritage of all English-speakers.

Keywords: Classical, Drama, English, Latin, Literature, Medieval, Middle Ages, Proverbs, Proverbial Phrases, Renaissance, Shakespeare.

Many people who love the English language, and who enjoy seeking out the origins of words and phrases, treat William Shakespeare as a kind of deity. The 16th and 17th century poet and playwright enjoys the reputation of having had a prodigiously large vocabulary, and having single-handedly coined more words and phrases than anyone else. Sometimes, this reverence for Shakespeare goes to lengths that seem unwarranted. For example, the philologist Ernest Weekley (1952 [1928]: 55) wrote: “Of Shakespeare it may be said without fear of exaggeration that his contribution to our phraseology is ten times greater than that of any writer to any language in the history of the world.”

But should we in fact fear exaggeration? It’s so well known that some people admire Shakespeare excessively that there is

even a word for it in the literary world: bardolatry. But current scholarship is disputing this received wisdom about Shakespeare's genius on several grounds, especially in the areas of vocabulary and word coinages. For example, Hugh Craig (2011) has shown that Shakespeare did not really have, as is often claimed, a prodigious vocabulary. The large number of total different words he used in all his writings is largely a function of the very large amount of his writing that survives. When compared to other playwrights of his time proportionally, Craig (2011: 68) finds that "Shakespeare is in fact no different from his contemporaries in the number of different words he uses." A similar study by Ward E.Y. Elliott and Robert J. Valenza (2011: 45) reached the similar conclusion that previous scholars were "right that Shakespeare had a big vocabulary, but wrong in supposing that it was bigger or better than other writers' vocabularies, either in his own day or since."

On the question of new coinages, the *Oxford English Dictionary* has 1,502 words for which it gives Shakespeare as the first citation. Jonathan Culpeper, the editor of the *Encyclopedia of Shakespeare's Language*, has been seeking and finding those words in books which predate Shakespeare. According to a plenary lecture he delivered (Culpeper 2017), his preliminary findings are that "if the current pattern continues, less than a quarter of those 1,502 words can reasonably be attributed to Shakespeare."

This essay attempts to look into similar issues, but at the level of phrases as well as individual words. After all, it is frequently claimed that Shakespeare coined an unusual number of phrases, too. How is this reputation perpetuated, and how well deserved is it? To explore this question, we may turn to a very well-known and widespread statement on the poet and playwright's penchant for coining both words and phrases, Bernard Levin's "On Quoting Shakespeare."

"On Quoting Shakespeare" first appeared in Levin's 1983 book *Enthusiasms*, and has since been republished, both with and without attribution, many thousands of times. It is sometimes reprinted as "Quoting Shakespeare" and sometimes as "You Are Quoting Shakespeare." On the internet, it is posted in thousands of locations, as an essay attributed to Levin, as a pirated piece with no attribution, as a jpg image with the quota-

tions in red, and in many paraphrased forms as well. It exists as a reading for theater workshops, in which many readers alternate in declaiming the various quotations, and it exists as a classroom exercise, in which children stand in a ring, individuals recite the expressions, and the whole group declares, “you are quoting Shakespeare!”¹

In its essay form, “On Quoting Shakespeare” begins:

If you cannot understand my argument, and declare ‘It’s Greek to me’, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you claim to be more sinned against than sinning, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you recall your salad days, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you act more in sorrow than in anger, if your wish is father to the thought, if your lost property has vanished into thin air, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you have ever refused to budge an inch or suffered from green-eyed jealousy, if you have played fast and loose, if you have been tongue-tied, a tower of strength, hoodwinked or in a pickle, if you have knitted your brows, made a virtue of necessity, insisted on fair play, slept not one wink, stood on ceremony, danced attendance (on your lord and master), laughed yourself into stitches, had short shrift, cold comfort or too much of a good thing, if you have seen better days or lived in a fool’s paradise — why, be that as it may, the more fool you, for it is a foregone conclusion that you are (as good luck would have it) quoting Shakespeare; if you think it is early days and clear out bag and baggage, if you think it is high time and that that is the long and short of it, if you believe that the game is up and that truth will out even if it involves your own flesh and blood, if you lie low till the crack of doom because you suspect foul play, if you have your teeth set on edge (at one fell swoop) without rhyme or reason, then — to give the devil his due — if the truth were known (for surely you have a tongue in your head) you are quoting Shakespeare; even if you bid me good riddance and send me packing, if you wish I was dead as a doornail, if you think I am an eyesore, a laughing stock, the devil incarnate, a stony-hearted vil-

lain, bloody-minded or a blinking idiot, then — by Jove! O Lord! Tut, tut! For goodness' sake! What the dickens! But me no buts — it is all one to me, for you are quoting Shakespeare.

In all, it seems to list 62 words and phrases that are allegedly quotes from Shakespeare. But how accurate is it to claim that using these phrases is “quoting Shakespeare?”² Let's look at the very first phrase Levin includes. According to Stevenson (1948), “It's Greek to me” was a common proverbial phrase for “I don't understand it” in both English and French, and seems to derive from Medieval Latin, where the phrase “it is Greek, and cannot be read” was used as a gloss. Shakespeare may have been quoting it from Gascoigne's “The Supposes,” a translation of Ariosto's Italian play, which used the phrase before him. But it probably was simply part of the oral tradition in his time, and available to him like “look before you leap” is available to us. Within twenty years of Shakespeare's play, “it was heathen (i.e. ancient) Greek to me” was the common form of the proverb, showing that it probably didn't become popular through Shakespeare, either. The “heathen Greek” form was used in the first English translation of Don Quixote and in other prominent works. (In Greek, by the way, as Stevenson points out, this was also a proverbial phrase, but they said “It is Hebrew to me!”)

Another example is “Give the devil his due.” This was a proverb in Shakespeare's day, and he even has Prince Henry say so in Henry IV Part I:

Sir John stands to his word. The devil shall have his bargain, for he was never yet a breaker of proverbs. He will give the devil his due.

Of course, “proverb” here could in theory refer to “the Devil shall have his bargain” or “give the Devil his due,” but Shakespeare removes all doubt in Henry V, Act III, scene 7, which occurs in the French camp as they await the battle of Agincourt. Orleans and the Constable engage in the common verbal game of trading proverbs:

ORLEANS
Ill will never said well.
Constable

I will cap that proverb with ‘There is flattery in friendship.’
 ORLEANS
 And I will take up that with ‘Give the devil his due.’
 Constable
 Well placed: there stands your friend for the devil: have
 at the very eye of that proverb with ‘A pox of the de-
 vil.’

So, apparently twice, Shakespeare explicitly identifies “Give the Devil His Due” as a proverb of his time...yet we are told by Levin that when we use this proverb we are “quoting Shakespeare.”

What about the other phrases identified by Levin as quotes from Shakespeare? They don’t fare very much better. Many of these supposed quotes from Shakespeare predate him by hundreds of years. Some appear to be Classical. So, Shakespeare never said “vanish into thin air” as Levin claims, but he said both “vanish into air” and “into thin air.” Stevenson tells us that “vanish into thin air” was a Latin expression used in the *Aeneid*, which Shakespeare surely knew. Stevenson likewise locates the first use of “the game is up” in the Latin works of Terence. “Make virtue of necessity” is a Classical Latin proverb, whose English form was much beloved of Chaucer, used by him in *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Squire’s Tale*, and *The Knight’s Tale*.

One of Levin’s phrases turns up in Old English: The website *Phrase Finder* tells us that “Flesh and Blood” can be found in the Anglo-Saxon Gospels, as a way of describing humankind. As a synonym for “family,” which is how Shakespeare uses it, the OED tells us the phrase goes back to about 1300, or about 300 years before Shakespeare used it.

Other of Levin’s expressions can be found in Middle English long before Shakespeare used them. The OED tells us that “lie low” goes back to 1250 and “high time” to about 1400. Stevenson provides many more examples: “cold comfort” (in the form “cold was his comfort”) was used in *Patience* (line 264), an anonymous alliterative medieval poem now believed to be by the same poet as *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; “dead as a doornail” was used as early as 1350 in the anonymous romance *William of Palerme*; and “to live in a

fool's paradise" shows up in letter 457 of the Paston letters, a famous set of English medieval correspondence, dated 1462.

Stevenson also misses some medieval examples: "dead as a doornail" was also used by Langland in the 1370s in *Piers Plowman* (In the A text, line 1.161): "And ded as a dore-nayl...." To sleep not one wink is recorded in the great 1303 preaching handbook, *Handlyng synne*, by Robert Manning of Brunne (lines 9145-9146): "Ne mete ete, ne drank drynke, Ne slepte onely a-lepy wynke." And "to knit one's brows" was used by Chaucer in the *Knight's Tale* (line 270): "This Palamon gan knytte his browes tweye."

Many expressions on the list have pre-Shakespearian provenance in the Renaissance. The Oxford English Dictionary tells us that "it is early days" was used by Sir Thomas More in 1535. "Hoodwinked," in the literal sense of "blindfolded" (which is the way Shakespeare used it twice), dates to 1562, according to the OED. (In the figurative sense of "deceive," it dates to Shakespeare's time, but he doesn't use it that way.) The OED also tells us that "tongue-tied" and "tongue-tie" go back to the early 16th century; that "by Jove" is first used in the anonymous 1575 play *Apus and Virginia*, and that "fair play" was first written down by Henryson in about 1500. "To have a tongue in your head," the *Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs* tells us, is first found in a 1564 translation of Erasmus. To "dance attendance" and "tut-tut" both go back at least to Skelton, writing in the 1520s, according to Stevenson and the OED, respectively.

Stevenson tells us that "foul play" was first used by Sidney in 1586 and that "play fast and loose" is first known from the anonymous "Tottle's Miscellany" of 1557. He shows that "bag and baggage" is used in John Berners' translation of Froissart in 1525: "'We haue with vs all our bagges and baggages that we haue wonne by armes.'" (Incidentally, Shakespeare also uses "bag and baggage" in this original sense of army supplies.) Stevenson judges the first use of "what the dickens" to be from Heywood, two years before Shakespeare also used it. But it's likely to be older, because Stevenson also shows that "dickens," as a euphemism for the Devil, is first recorded in an Udall's English translation of Rabelais in 1534. And speak of the Devil, Stevenson shows us that "devil incarnate" dates from

1570, 18 years before Shakespeare used it. From Bond (1911: 128), we learn that “to send someone packing” was used in the play *The Buggbears* (line 96) by Johanus Jeffre, a translation of an Italian play of about 1580.

The Phrase Finder gives us information on some of the other Renaissance expressions. “Rhyme or reason” was used in 1460, but the negative, “neither rhyme nor reason,” turns up in 1548 in Nicolas Udall’s translation of *The first tome or volume of the paraphrase of Erasmus upon the Newe Testament*—before Shakespeare used the phrase. “Stony-hearted” was in use by 1569, when it turns up in in Thomas Underdown’s translation of the *Æthiopian History of Heliodorus*, and “bloody-minded” was in use by 1584, when Richard Greene used it in *Gwydonius*.

“In a pickle” in the sense of a dangerous or difficult spot, is first attested as “in ill pickle” in Thomas Tusser’s *Five Hundreth Pointes of Good Husbandrie*, 1573, which contains the following proverb:

“Reape barlie with sickle, that lies in ill pickle.” (In other words, if barley is in too tangled an area to use a scythe, you’d better use a sickle.)

The OED tells us that “eyesore” in its metaphorical sense of something ugly, goes back at least to 1530, when John Rastell used it in his *A New Book of Purgatory*, which was a then-controversial defense of the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory in a Protestant country. Rastell was rebutted by John Frith, and they wrote a series of books back and forth arguing with each other. Amusingly, the OED tells us that “Laughing-Stock” is first found in one of these books by Frith, in 1533, called *Another Book Against Rastell*. So we have the eyesore rebutted by the laughing-stock, at least 50 years before Levin suggests that Shakespeare coined both terms.

As we might imagine, several of these expressions go back to religious books. “It is all one” and “teeth on edge” are both found in Wyclif’s English Bible of 1382. A “tower of strength” is in the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer*. The *King James Bible* gives us “lord and master”; Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, where he uses it, was performed before the Bible was printed, but not published until after. We can’t be sure the phrase was in the

play as performed, and even if it was, it's extremely unlikely that it influenced the Bible's editors. Indeed, it's unlikely the phrase originated with Shakespeare or the Bible anyway, since other versions such as "lord and sovereign" and "lord and sire" were well known in Middle English. And of course the suggestion that Shakespeare coined "O Lord" is silly; this phrase turns up in all versions of the Bible.

In some cases, the origin in Shakespeare is a matter of interpretation. So for example, to "stand on ceremony" usually means "to insist upon social niceties." Shakespeare uses the phrase "stand on ceremonies" in *Julius Caesar*, but there it clearly means "believe in omens." He never uses the phrase with the singular "ceremony" or with its current meaning. However, variants of the phrase with its current meaning pre-date Shakespeare, including "stand on titles," "stand on invitation," and "stand upon minute points of wisdom." Other variants from Shakespeare's time include "stand upon punctilioes" and "stand upon trifles." So did he invent "stand on ceremony?" It is hard to say, but it seems more likely that the phrase was current in his time.

Similarly, "the more fool you" existed in such phrases as "the longer thou livest, the more fool thou art," dated by Stevenson to 1568 and "the more fool is he" dated by OED to 1530. The Phrase Finder tells us that to have "seen better days" was first printed in *Sir Thomas More*, a play sometimes attributed to Shakespeare with others, so it could have been written by Shakespeare, but the evidence is not good. "Good riddance," specifically, as far as we can tell, was first written down by Shakespeare, but as "fayre riddance." The Phrase Finder tells us that the phrase was used by Rastell in 1525, and the OED shows us "clene riddance" in 1577. So did Shakespeare coin a phrase or update one, or (an option that seems more likely), was he simply the first to record one version idiomatic phrase that was current in oral tradition and changing with the language during his lifetime?

Likewise, Levin's "the truth will out" seems to come from pre-existing phrases. It is in fact a truncated form of Shakespeare's phrase, which was "at length the truth will out." It occurs in Shakespeare in a speech that also includes "truth will come to light." Recognized as a French proverb in 1592 is "le

temps met le verité au jour; time brings the truth to light.” It’s a short leap from this proverb to both “truth will come to light” and “at length the truth will out.” So, was Shakespeare coining a phrase or using a proverb?

There are some phrases in Levin’s list that are not found in Shakespeare at all. One is “but me no buts,” which was never used by Shakespeare. Another is “the long and the short of it,” which reverses the order of the line from Shakespeare. Shakespeare said “the brief and the long” in *Henry V* and “the short and the long” in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Stevenson tells us that this was a common proverbial phrase in Shakespeare’s time, going back at least to the fourteenth century, and that it had been used in prominent plays by Richard Edwards (1571) and Thomas Nashe (1589) that Shakespeare might have known. “Be that as it may” doesn’t seem to be in Shakespeare, but “be it as it may be” is, which is clearly an updated form of “be as be may,” which you find in Chaucer and elsewhere in the middle ages. So “be that as it may,” seems to be just another updated medieval phrase. In any case, these are things Shakespeare did not even say, but Levin claims we are quoting him when WE say them.

Finally, some of Levin’s claims are just very difficult to check, so “if the truth were known” is very hard to verify because it is just a phrase made of common words and can occur easily in normal speech and writing with no intention to use a set phrase. As far as I know, no one has ever investigated it. Since Levin is obviously willing to claim almost anything IN Shakespeare, and some things not in Shakespeare, were originated by Shakespeare, I think his claim that Shakespeare originated it is really just a guess.

So, where does this leave us? Of the 62 phrases claimed by Levin to be quotes from Shakespeare, only 20 are actually attested first from Shakespeare’s writings. But given Shakespeare’s era, that’s not even a guarantee that he originated them. It’s almost certain that some of these phrases were things Shakespeare heard and picked up from common speech. As an example, I haven’t found “too much of a good thing” before Shakespeare used it in *As You Like It* in about 1600. But Stevenson shows that it was used by Cotgrave in 1611, and was frequently called a “proverb” after that. Can we really claim

Shakespeare invented it? Wouldn't it be better to call it proverbial as The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations does? And while "as good luck would have it" is not attested before Shakespeare, "as ill luck would have it" was also current in his time, as Stevenson shows. Again, it seems likely these are two versions of a proverbial phrase. So, while it's impossible to know if any one of Levin's phrases was invented by Shakespeare, it's certain that about two thirds of them were not, very likely that about three quarters were not.

Levin is not alone in falsely attributing common phrases to Shakespeare. It's a rhetorical tactic that turns up wherever advocates for the great poet and playwright gather and publish. The Royal Shakespeare Company's web page "Shakespeare's Language," for example, claims that the phrases 'Elbow room' (*King John*), 'heart of gold' (*Henry V*), 'tower of strength' (*Richard III*) and 'wild goose chase' (*Romeo and Juliet*) are

we've learnt from Shakespeare and use in our day to day lives more than 400 years later." In fact, as Stevenson tells us, "elbow room" dates at least to 1540, when Andrew Boorde used it. "Heart of gold" was used in an anonymous 15th century poem known as "The Lamentation of Mary Magdalene." In Shakespeare's day, this poem was erroneously attributed to

Strength," as we've seen, dates at least to the 1540s and the *Book of Common Prayer*. So "wild goose chase" is the only one of these phrases that we can't confidently date to before Shakespeare's use of them, and even that phrase is present as if its figurative meaning is obvious to the audience, so seems likely to be proverbial. It was used about ten years later by Chapman and 15 years after that by Beaumont and Fletcher, suggesting again that it might have been a common phrase that Shakespeare's work happens to preserve first.

Another institution with a vested interest in Shakespeare, the Folger Shakespeare Library, likewise promotes the notion

handout "Try Your Hand at Shakespeare" provides 33 phrases supposedly by Shakespeare, including "but me no buts," which Shakespeare never used, and many others that we've already

gage,” “dead as a doornail,” “give the devil his due,” “in a others.

Given these findings, it might be interesting to ask: why do so many people want to claim that we are “quoting Shakespeare” when we are in fact employing common proverbial phrases? This question breaks down into two parts: why do people want to identify the origin of these phrases at all? And, why do they want the origin to be in Shakespeare’s works?

An answer to the first question and part of the second can be found in the insightful essay “The Creation Myths of Cooperstown,” by the late paleontologist and evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould, who points out that people tend to yearn for a definitive moment of origin for any phenomenon. One of the “creation myths” of the article’s title is the story that Abner Doubleday invented baseball in Cooperstown, New York, in 1839. This story is untrue, and Abner Doubleday has no known connection to baseball. As Gould points out, the background to the story is that A. G. Spalding, an early star pitcher and then founder of the Spalding sporting goods company, was publisher of the annual *Spalding’s Official Base Ball Guide*, and thus was one of the institutional powers within the sport. In 1907, he set up a blue ribbon committee to figure out the origins of baseball. The committee didn’t find anything until Spalding himself delivered a letter, which he claimed to be from a third party. The letter claimed that in 1839 Abner Doubleday had interrupted a marbles game in Cooperstown to draw a diagram of a diamond-shaped playing field and explain the rules of a game he called “base ball.” In 1908, the Mills Commission dutifully reported “that base ball had its origins in the United States;” and “that the first scheme for playing it, according to the best evidence available to date, was devised by Abner Doubleday, at Cooperstown, New York, in 1839.”

In fact, filmmaker Sam Marchiano has shown that baseball is first mentioned in the diary of Englishman William Bray in 1755, a reference which Spalding could not have known. (See Major League Baseball’s Base Ball Discovered website.) But it was also prominently mentioned by Jane Austen in the novel *Northanger Abbey*, completed in about 1798 and published in 1817, which he should have known. Like claims about the ori-

gins of so many common phrases being found in the works of Shakespeare, this claim of American origin for baseball is clearly spurious.

Why was there even a commission trying to establish an origin for baseball? It's fairly clear that baseball must have evolved from other games involving a ball and a bat, such as rounders and cricket. Why try to establish an exact origin? Gould's general feeling about this is: "We yearn to know about origins, and we readily construct myths when we do not have data (or we suppress data in favor of legend when a truth strikes us as too commonplace). The hankering after an origin myth has always been especially strong for the closest subject of all—the human race. But we extend the same psychic need to our accomplishments and institutions—and we have origin myths and stories for the beginning of hunting, of language, of art, of kindness, of war, of boxing, bowties, and brassieres."

Although Spalding's exact motivations for claiming this origin of baseball are unknown, Gould points out that it was a useful creation story. He observes first of all that "hoopla and patriotism ...decreed that a national pastime must have an indigenous origin. The idea that baseball had evolved from a wide variety of English stick-and-ball games—although true—did not suit the mythology of a phenomenon that had become so quintessentially American." Gould also provides evidence that establishing such an indigenous origin had long been Spalding's goal, based partly on a good-natured bet with an English-born friend.

Secondly, there was the specific figure of Abner Doubleday. For several reasons, he was an appropriate person to "invent" an American sport. I will quote again from Gould: "Abner Doubleday, as captain of the Union artillery, had personally sighted and given orders for firing the first responsive volley following the initial Confederate attack on [Fort Sumter]. Doubleday later commanded divisions at Antietam and Fredericksburg, became at least a minor hero at Gettysburg, and retired as a brevet major general." So, as Gould notes, Spalding selected a culture hero to suit his myth: not just any American, but a decorated combat veteran who exemplified Spalding's chosen virtues of patriotism and physical courage.

I think this applies to “On Quoting Shakespeare” in a number of ways. Gould’s general argument is that people appear more comfortable with a tale specifying the time and place at which a hero invented an item of culture than with an evolutionary narrative pointing out how a cultural phenomenon developed over time. That works in the example of these phrases, too: the most probable explanation of many of these phrases, which is that they developed from folk speech, emerged through a myriad of speech acts from ordinary people, and then were picked up by the literary class, is apparently less satisfying than the assertion that they come from Shakespeare. When there is no data, an origin with Shakespeare is simply asserted, and when there is contradictory data, it is ignored or suppressed—just as Gould points out happens to “creation myths” in general.

Another question is: why is Shakespeare the chosen culture hero for this creation myth? A simple answer would be that Shakespeare is highly esteemed as a great (perhaps the greatest) writer in the English language. He is, in short, a beloved figure to people who care about English, just as Doubleday was a beloved figure to Americans. Authors like Bernard Levin have a sincere love of Shakespeare, which may lead to wishful thinking. In addition, Shakespeare lived early enough in the language’s development to make the assertion that he originated all these common phrases at least plausible; we wouldn’t believe that about, say, Faulkner or even Jane Austen. His status as by far the most read English writer of his era, and the earliest English writer with whom many readers are acquainted, also helps: in trying to find an earlier example of a phrase, most people wouldn’t even know where to look, so it’s easy to claim Shakespeare invented any phrase.

On a more banal level, errors in math and selection bias make Shakespeare appear to be a genius. As we have seen, his apparently huge vocabulary turns out to be a function of the size of his corpus, and his apparently huge number of word coinages turns out to be a function of bias: dictionary editors are much more likely to have read Shakespeare than any of the literature that preceded him. While both of these claims are being slowly debunked by modern scholarship, they have provid-

ed a context in which it is quite plausible to also assert that he coined phrases at a prodigious rate.

A further reason is that Shakespeare is one of the few authors with a large number of full-time professional advocates. Well-funded organizations like the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Folger Shakespeare Library engage in professional advocacy for Shakespeare's works at a level most authors will never experience. This means that people with little experience at tracing the early history of words and phrases have a vested interest in claiming honors for Shakespeare—a sure formula for erroneous or spurious claims.

But part of the explanation goes deeper, I think. Although Shakespeare was himself what we would call middle-class, he is one of the English authors most favored by the wealthy and intellectually elite today. Knowing quotes from Shakespeare is associated with being intellectually impressive. After all, as the song goes, “Brush up your Shakespeare, start quoting him now, brush up your Shakespeare, and the women you will wow.” In insisting that we're all quoting this one writer, so beloved of intellectuals, therefore, the essay embodies a certain intellectual elitism.

To put this into perspective, let's examine some editorial commentary from Arianna Huffington, who republished “Quoting Shakespeare” in the Huffington Post. In introducing the piece, Huffington wrote:

The following bit of Shakespearean amusement was concocted by my great friend Bernard Levin, who passed away last year. It was recited to perfection by

Stewart Resnick in honor of all the speakers at the Aspen Institute's Ideas Festival. After York's rendition, the party erupted with requests (including one from Arthur Schlesinger) for copies of what York had just read. So instead of running out to Kinko's, I've decided to

download, print out, e-mail, link to... and enjoy.

So, in Huffington's account, Levin's essay is associated with a shining gathering of the rich and brilliant in Aspen, at which the intellectual Schlesinger and the multi-billionaire Resnicks

were delighted by the cleverness of Levin and celebrity Actor Michael York. Instead of “running out to Kinko’s,” as an ordinary person might do, she instead published Levin’s “amuse-

happened to own at the time. It’s all quite openly—one might say refreshingly—elitist.

The rhetorical approach of Levin’s essay, similarly, is openly hegemonic. The rhetorical addressees of the essay, the “you” of “You Are Quoting Shakespeare,” are presumably the readers—us. We are instructed by the (apparently) better-informed narrator that when we use common phrases, we are “quoting Shakespeare.” We are repeatedly one-upped by the narrator, who knows (or thinks he knows) that the phrases are really quotes from Shakespeare, and who assumes that we do not know this. The narrator even inserts “tut-tut” and “but me no buts,” traditional ways by which pedantic speakers assert hegemonic authority. And in this case, the narrator’s pedantry is quite empty, since in most cases the phrases were not coined by Shakespeare.

So if claiming that we are quoting Shakespeare is an understandable bit of myth-making on the one hand, on the other it reinforces a view of the world in which cleverness consists of asserting (quite without evidence) that items of folk speech are borrowed from an intellectual elite, and then subtly mocking ordinary speakers for not knowing this. The essay becomes a vehicle of this cultural hegemony: folk speech is appropriated by the elite and attributed an origin that only the elite are clever enough to know. Then this largely spurious origin is “taught” to ordinary people with “tut-tuts” inserted for maximum effect.

As a corrective to this image, let’s remember a few things. Most of these phrases were certainly not created by Shakespeare. Of those phrases for which Shakespeare furnishes the first known example, many still seem to have been current in oral tradition in his day. Others could still have been borrowed from oral tradition or from other writers. The evidence thus does not establish that any of these phrases was specifically coined by Shakespeare.

On the other hand, it is very likely that many of these items were created by ordinary speakers in the course of ordinary speech, and therefore have no known authors. Like baseball,

they were invented at an unknown time by unknown people, and then refined by other unknown people. They are not the product of a famous artist or intellectual, but the common heritage of all English-speakers. They are, in short, folklore.

These observations do not in any way diminish Shakespeare's genius or his accomplishments. (Or his honesty--after all, HE never claimed we were quoting him!) In fact, Shakespeare's genius lay not in coining words and phrases but in deploying them. Much of his art lay precisely in his ability to employ the speech patterns of real people to create believable characters. The very notion that a popular playwright would coin a vast number of words and phrases in his plays seems counter-intuitive: as a playwright, his job was to create believable characters and connect with audiences. It would be strange to give a character words and phrases unfamiliar to the audience unless part of the plot involved that character being an innovator or speaking words the audience doesn't know. A better strategy would be to create dialogue out of the best of the pithy, poetic proverbial speech that anyone might say, and that everyone could understand. This appears to be what Shakespeare actually did.

While the elite creation myth of Stratford-Upon-Aspen may tell us that we are quoting Shakespeare, therefore, it might be more accurate to say that Shakespeare was quoting us.

Notes

¹ The classroom exercise was promoted on the website of my friends and Capitol Hill colleagues at the Folger Shakespeare Library. It has since been removed from their website. But other similar classroom exercises, which accept uncritically the idea that using these phrases is "quoting Shakespeare," can be found in many places, including the Folger's "Try Your Hand at Shakespeare" and a "Teacher Resource Pack" (Giles et. al., n.d.) prepared by the British Council and the Royal Shakespeare Company, both of which teach children many falsehoods about phrases that Shakespeare supposedly invented.

² "Quoting" can mean a number of things. Since one of the points of the essay seems to be that the addressee doesn't already know he or she is quoting Shakespeare, simply saying something Shakespeare also once said, without intending to, wouldn't qualify as quoting—otherwise, why aren't you "quoting" the thousands of other people who also said those phrases before you? (To put it another way, in the words of one commenter on the essay on The Huffington Post, "when you say 'the' you are quoting Shakespeare.") Because of this, we have to assume that if these phrases are "quoting Shakespeare," Levin is arguing that Shakespeare originated them.

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