

## Shakespeare and the word

June 21 2009

### Introduction

- Victor Hugo said: “England has 2 books, the Bible and Shakespeare. England made Shakespeare but the Bible made England.”
- This points to the importance of both books and one might add a third “The Book of Common Prayer” from which we have conducted the service this morning.
- The sonorous phrases of the PB created by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer have entered into the consciousness of English speaking people e.g:

“We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep” (General Confession)

“We do not presume to come to this thy table merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness but in thy manifold and great mercies” (Humble access)

“Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we thine unworthy servants do give thee most humble and hearty thanks for all thy goodness and loving kindness to us and to all men” (General Thanksgiving)

- Between 1549, when Cranmer’s first PB appeared and 1611, when the KJV was published there was a flowering of the English language and it is in this period that Will SH lived.
- Born in 1564, 15 years after the first PB and died in 1616, just 5 years after the KJV bible.
- Between 1500 and 1660 some 12,000 new words entered the English language.
- In the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations Sh produced 1/10 of all the most quotable utterances written or spoken in English since its inception.
- It was also the period when the language of officialdom / documents shifted from Latin to English.
- PB introduction “...the service in this C of E that many years hath been read in Latin to the people, which they understand not. So that they have heard with their ears only and their hearts, spirits and minds have not been edified thereby”
- Significantly, Sh’s birth is recorded in Latin in the register at Stratford but his death is in English “Wm Sh, Gentleman”

### 1. The importance of language

- We are liable today to denigrate / debase language
- Verbal diarrhoea of the radio DJ or the rap artist or the spin doctoring of politicians
- Equally we can underestimate the power of words. E.g. a boy being bullied at school said “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me” – profoundly untrue
- Words can remain and fester in our inner beings long after a bodily / physical wound has healed

- A mother screaming verbal abuse at her child in the supermarket may not be committing physical abuse but the effect of constant verbal lashing can be longer lasting and more devastating than a smack
- We use words to express what is in our hearts – to reveal ourselves
- We are gripped when a writer such as Sh puts into words and articulates what we feel and want to express
- As someone who has had to learn 2 languages for my working life, I know the frustration of not being able to express what is in my heart
- What a difference it made in my relationships when I began to be able to speak freely in the new language
- An inability to express one's deepest feelings can lead to explosions of physical violence
- It is very important that in our Christian worship we are able to express the full range of human emotion and experience and bring them before God
- The Psalms are the PB of the church. It must have been revolutionary for Sh and his contemporaries to say or sing the Psalms in English for the first time when for centuries it had been spoken, incomprehensibly, in Latin

## 2. Shakespeare's language

- Bill Bryson in his book on Shakespeare says that what really characterises Sh's work is a positive appreciation of the "Transfixing power of language" (Bryson p 109)
- Here we have echoes of the word of God in its creative power: "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:10 – 11)
- Sh coined and made first use of 2035 words (Bryson 112)
- But his real gift was as a "phrase maker". Bryson quotes Stanley Wells as saying "Sh's language has a quality difficult to define, of memorability that has caused many phrases to enter the common language." To mention a few:

"One fell swoop"

"Vanish into thin air"

"Play fast and loose"

"To be in a pickle"

"Budge an inch"

"The milk of human kindness"

"More sinned against than sinning"

- Sh was also a wonderful teller of stories so long as someone else had told them first!
- He echoed Jesus's use of parables which were often based on stories from Jewish folk lore
- Jesus absorbed the Torah, the Word of God, the Jewish Law from his childhood in the house of Joseph and Mary and in the synagogue

- This led to his profoundly agonising expression in his words for the cross, when he quoted Psalm 22 “My God, my God why have you forsaken me”
- Sh absorbed the Bible through his Grammar School education in Stratford which would have included much reading from scripture, even some in Latin and Greek
- His knowledge of the Bible was based on the Geneva Bible, an English translation, published in 1560, that was popularly available at that time
- Sh’s ability to express the workings of the human heart is masterful
- He often seems at his best when exploring the fallenness of human nature. As Jeremiah put it “...the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked: who can know it?” (Jer 17:9)

The workings of a **guilty conscience** in Lady Macbeth “...out damned spot, out I say! ...What! Will these hands ne’er be clean? ...Here’s the smell of the blood still: All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand” (Act 5 scene 1)

The **self-disgust of lust** (sonnet 129):

The expense of spirit in a waste of shame  
 Is lust in action; and till action, lust  
 Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame,  
 Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,  
 Enjoy'd no sooner but despised straight,  
 Past reason hunted, and no sooner had  
 Past reason hated, as a swallow'd bait  
 On purpose laid to make the taker mad;  
 Mad in pursuit and in possession so;  
 Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;  
 A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe;  
 Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.  
 All this the world well knows; yet none knows well  
 To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

(Amnon’s Rape of his sister Tamar 2 Sam 13:1 – 21)

The **subtle and manipulative use of the bible for one’s own evil ends.**

Richard 111’s delight in feigning reverence for Scripture all the while letting the reader into his treachery.

“But then I sigh and with a piece of Scripture  
 Tell them that God bids us do good for evil;  
 And then I clothe my naked villainy  
 With odd ends stolen forth of Holy Writ  
 And seem a saint when must I play the devil”  
 (Richard 111 Act 1 Scene 3)

He captures **the sense of meaningless** expressed by the writer of the book of Ecclesiastes “vanity of vanity all is vanity” as he puts these words into the mouth of Macbeth:

“Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow  
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
 To the last syllable of recorded time;  
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
 The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle!  
 Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player  
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
 And then is heard no more, it is a tale  
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury  
 Signifying nothing (Act5 Scene 6)

- More positively, Sh also describes **the nature of true love** as expressed in Sonnet 16:

“Love is not love  
 Which alters when it alteration finds,  
 Or bends with the remover to remove:  
 O, no! It is an ever-fixed mark,  
 That looks on tempests and is never shaken;  
 It is the star to every wandering bark,  
 Whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken.  
 Love’s not time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
 Within his bending sickle’s compass come;  
 Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
 But bears it out even to the edge of doom.  
 If this be error, and upon me prov’d,  
 I never writ, nor no man ever lov’d.

- This has resonances with St Paul’s great hymn to love from 1 or 13

## Conclusion

- Elizabeth 1 had made it her policy “not to open windows into men’s souls”
- Provided the citizens conformed to the accepted religious practices, the authorities did not torture people in order to examine their innermost thoughts on the subjects of politics and religion
- As Alvin Kaernan has written “It would seem that Sh took his politics, like his religion and his philosophy, to his grave with him”
- This was a wise and prudent thing to do in an age of religious and political turbulence
- Sh’s own personal convictions remain a mystery
- But his ability to articulate the workings of the human heart reveal a genius

“A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of  
 silver” (Prov 24:11)