



Book Reviews

Everyday Shakespeare: Lines for life (a review)

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This review fits in well with Asya Akopova's excellent article on tailoring the English Language for History majors in university as it is about the famous Elizabethan playwright and poet, William Shakespeare. Compiled by actor, director and Shakespeare expert Ben Crystal and the world-renowned expert on applied linguistics and the English language, David Crystal, incidentally, Ben's father, *Everyday Shakespeare: Lines for Life* offers a quotation from Shakespeare's plays and poems for every day of the year, giving a simple but addictive insight into how Shakespeare used the language of his time to create his masterpieces. It is an excellent resource for teachers and researchers in English literature and for teachers running courses in history or the English language at upper intermediate and advanced levels. As an example, here's the entry for September 24th from *Hamlet*. Queen Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, is replying to him after he has told her a secret.

*Be thou assured, if words be made of breath
And breath of life, I have no life to breathe
what thou hast said to me* (Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 4).

What she says gives pause for thought. What does she actually mean? What do these words *thou* and *hast* mean? Ben and David Crystal explain it simply. *Thou* means 'you' and *hast* is the present tense singular form of 'have'. *Breath* is used to mean 'speech' or 'voice' and *to breathe* in this context means 'to repeat'. So, she is simply saying, 'I won't repeat to anyone what you have told me'.

The authors go on to explain the meaning of the speech, and how the different words are used. For example, the explanation of the speech quoted above goes like this: '*Hamlet asks his mother Gertrude never to reveal what has passed between them and especially that he is not in madness. But mad in craft. The Queen strongly re-assures him using these words*'. They also offer other examples of the way the word *breathe* is used in Shakespeare's plays, taking examples from *King John*, *The Merry Wives*

of Windsor and this one from *The Merchant of Venice* spoken by the leading female character in the play, Portia, who says: '*I have toward heaven breathed a secret vow*'.

Work that one out. It's not hard. 'I have made a secret promise to heaven' and the speech goes on '*to live in prayer and contemplation*'.

How did the authors select their quotations and allocate them to different dates in the year? In their introduction they say they selected extracts both from Shakespeare's best-known plays and poems and sonnets but also from lesser-known pieces or plays that are not so often produced in the theatre. Examples include *King John*, *Henry 4*, *Henry 6*, and others.

How were decisions taken what quote to choose for what day of the month? In their introduction the authors explain how quotes were arranged in each month of the year. January features some of the best quotes they found. February focused on love and laughter and March on grief, sorrow, hope and peace.

April contained some of the most frequent quotes which people hear and use, and May focuses on nature. June explores expressions of emotion like insults and argument and July looks at politics and tyranny, a key feature of Shakespeare's history plays. In contrast, August's quotes focus on wisdom.

As Autumn begins, September features quotes about work, honesty, secrets and money while October features love, marriage, children and, as the authors put it, '*grounded outlooks on death*'. November looks at friendship and also what people say when their friends have to leave while, finally, December takes us home and looks at arriving, welcome, celebration and kindness.

As mentioned, every day has a quote and the words that teachers and learners may not be familiar with are explained as they have changed in meaning over the years or centuries. The authors often offer a number of definitions for a single word and use what is called a 'lexical triangulation' which offers a number

of alternative definitions of words. For example, on September 24th, the authors stress the relationship between words and breathing and define the noun *breath* as *utterance*, *speech*, and *voice*. The verb *breathe* can mean *speak*, *utter*, and *talk*. In the authors' view the modern meaning may lie somewhere in the middle.

Following the daily quotes and the commentaries that accompany them the book lists an index of sources in alphabetical order and an abbreviation of the titles for ease of reference. *Macbeth*, for instance is *Mac* and *Romeo and Juliet* is *RJ*. The detailed index presents the date, the opening of the quote and the reference to the play or poem or sonnet. This is followed by an index of themes and finally by an index of the openings of the lead quotes presented with the date references.

Although not its intention or part of its methodology, for teachers of history and of classical literature *Everyday Shakespeare* offers a simple and effective lesson plan every day to introduce students to differences in the way the English language was used in medieval times. Look at the book, choose the quotation for the day you are teaching, present it to the class and get

them to work out what it means. It also offers historians and language and English literature specialists a valuable and entertaining source of reference to browse through and help keep themselves up to speed.

The authors are not the first to create a daily programme of teaching, though maybe it's a first for Shakespeare. Steven Covey, author of the *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* wrote a calendar of things to do, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama of Tibet offered daily topics of meditation, leading to a more fulfilled life. So, teachers, it's time to get on your bikes and start working or, as Lady Macbeth put it, when telling guests to leave a royal banquet her husband was hosting, '*stand not upon the order of your going, but go at once*'.

Everyday Shakespeare is instructive, entertaining and an enjoyable source of information which can have a positive impact on students and teachers alike both in the classroom and for personal study. The book is available in print, but an online audio version is also available. What next, we ask ourselves? Everyday Pushkin, Everyday Goethe and everyday Voltaire or Rousseau? I can't wait!