

# Much Ado About Something

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By JAMES C. HUMES

It is serendipitous that today, the feast day of St. George, the patron saint of England, also marks the date of birth in 1564 and death in 1616 of William Shakespeare, the patron saint of the English language.

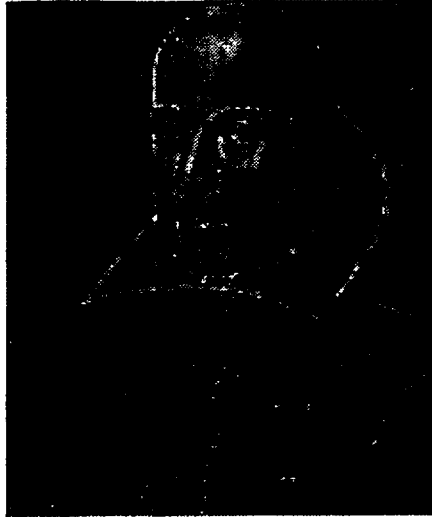
"We who speak Shakespeare's tongue," as Churchill put it, everyday echo his genius. Shakespeare added more than 1,700 words to the English language. A few such words are "frugal," "dire," and "lapse." The exigencies of rhyme and meter would prompt the English poet to take "modeste" from the French to coin "modest" or "obscenus" from the Latin to mint "obscene" or "rod" from his Warwickshire dialect to make "road." Sometimes he would make nouns of verbs, such as "accommodation" (accommodate), "reliance" (rely) and "employment" (employ). Or he would add prefixes and suffixes to mint new words, such as "dishearten," "invulnerable," "baseless" and "countless." His 37 plays and over 100 sonnets would reshape the English language.

Some doubt that this son of an illiterate glove-maker who left school at 12 could pen such timeless plays. (Of course, Lincoln, who only had three years of schooling, wrote the Gettysburg Address.) A rebuttal to the skeptics lies in the Bodleian Library in Oxford. A letter in 1610 from Ben Jonson to Francis Beaumont, another contemporary playwright, bemoans the fact that Shakespeare, despite his lack of a university education, was their superior in craft.

One reason his plays are still as popular as ever is that he wrote for the masses. If Shakespeare were alive today, he probably would be writing for movies and television. As an actor he knew what would entertain "the penny public," who chose to

spend their pence on a play instead of a cock-fight or bear-baiting. Academics of his day panned him for violating the Greek unities of time and plot. Some point out that he "borrowed" his material. Of course he did—just like today's movie and television writers.

He used "Romeo and Juliet," a poem adapted from an Italian novella. He cut



the nine-month romance to four days, and chopped a few years off Juliet's age to make it more daring. Then he added a bawdy pinch of servant comedy, a dash of sword play (the 16th Century equivalent of a shoot-out), and interspersed it with the most beautiful love poetry ever written. Shakespeare borrowed from Plutarch's "The Parallel Lives" for "Julius Caesar," and from the English historian Holinshed for his chronicles. But it was Shake-

speare's poetry and characterization that would make him immortal.

Shakespeare was not the first playwright to depict a hero but he was the first to make a popular folk hero of an anti-hero with such villainous vices as cowardice, thievery and lechery. W.C. Fields, Bob Hope and Jackie Gleason owe much to the character of Falstaff.

It is "a foregone conclusion" that you will be quoting Shakespeare on his birthday if you have "a tongue in your head," unless you are "tongue-tied," or you have "vanished into thin air," or are as "dead as a doornail."

For "the long and short of it"—even if you "didn't budge an inch" from the house—you will probably quote Shakespeare. If you told an office colleague that you "laughed yourself into stitches" watching a sit-com, or said to a neighbor the doctor in the soap opera is suffering from "the green-eyed monster," you are quoting Shakespeare.

If you tell a friend that you "have seen better days," or recall "your salad days," you are quoting Shakespeare.

If you suspect "foul play" and insist on "fair play" from a competitor because he has played "fast and loose" with the facts, you are quoting Shakespeare.

Shakespeare's rich collection of words, phrases, prose and poetry, "as good luck would have it," remains "a tower of strength" for the English language.

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