A SHORT SURVEY ON SHAKESPEARE'S MOST FAMOUS QUOTATIONS

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Abstract: *Reflections have come into the world once human thinking has developed itself. Therefore they represent an ancient cultural heritage, which has been transmitted – first orally, then in writing – from one generation to the other. Their richest and most known source originates in the Greek and Latin literatures. I think we wouldn't exaggerate if we asserted that, during the modern cultural époque, almost each and every person makes daily use of a certain proverb, an adage or a quotation, in order to increase the power of his/her words. Shakespeare stands out as the greatest producers of speech in the English literature. Shakespeare gave rise to certain genuine characters. Each of them makes up a world in itself, so that anyone can easily find himself/herself in a certain character. Therefore this research aims at pointing out the most known Shakespearean reflections which, when used in a certain context, could be useful for those who want to colour the way they talk or write.*

Key words*: Shakespeare, producer, speech, reflections, characters.*

Reflections have come into the world once human thinking has developed itself. Therefore they represent an ancient cultural heritage, which has been transmitted – first orally, then in writing – from one generation to the other. Their richest and most known source originates in the Greek literature (Homer, Aristotle, Sophocles, Aristophanes) and Latin writers (Vergil, Horatio, Cicero, Juvenal, Ovid, Terence). During the Renaissance époque, as well as during the post-Renaissance period, among the greatest producers of famous words we could mention: Shakespeare – in the English literature (who was named "the treasure of words"); Rabelais, Molière, La Fontaine, Boileau, Voltaire, Montaigne – in the French literature; Goethe, Lessing, Schiller, Heine – in the German literature; Puşkin and Tolstoi – in the Russian literature; and Eminescu and Creangă, Caragiale and Coşbuc, Sadoveanu and Arghezi – in the Romanian literature.

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Shakespeare stands out as the greatest producers of speech in the English literature. Shakespeare's literary production is made up of about 20000 words, among which certain words seem to have been created by the author himself; the associations of words give rise to new meanings, so that some special studies as well as some Shakespearean grammar-books were needed in order to come to a complete understanding of the texts. Shakespeare gave rise to certain genuine characters: the fighter, the outlaw, the intriguer, the lover, the cynic, the executioner, the revolutionary, the tyrant, the oppressed, the winner, the scholar, the cipher, the courageous man, the coward man, and the list may go on. Each of them makes up a world in itself, so that anyone can easily find himself/herself in a certain character. Therefore this research aims at pointing out the most known Shakespearean reflections which, when used in a certain context, could be useful for those who want to colour the way they talk or write.

"*A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!*" are the famous words from *Richard III* (Act 5, Scene 7, extracted from SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 220). The vain King of England utters these words in moments of desperation, after having been

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defeated in the battle from Bosworth (1485). Finding himself at a loss he decides to give his kingdom for a horse in order to escape and save his life. That's why this quotation is used whenever somebody is willing to give all his/her possessions in order to obtain a small, yet important thing. Eminescu, in *Sărmanul Dionis*, makes use of a close expression: "*My kingdom for a cigarette!*", Eminescu parodying here the famous hemistich from the Shakespearean play, by making use of the romantic irony. And in Chekhov's short story "*Three Years*", one of the heroines gives "*a kingdom for a cup of tea*".

"*Alas, poor Yorick!*": Yorick is the buffoon of the King of Denmark, in *Hamlet*. In the famous scene from the cemetery (Act 5, Scene 1), Hamlet, while talking to the grave diggers, sees the buffoon's skull, which leads him to some bitter remarks: "*Alas, poor Yorick … My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning?*" (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 684) "*Alas, poor Yorick!*" is now used to refer to the gradual decline of a certain person.

"*All the world's a stage*" is a famous line from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (Act 2, Scene 7). It is usually quoted together with the next line, which reinforces the idea: "*And all the men and women merely players*" (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 638) These words are uttered by Jacques, the faithful friend of the Duke who has lost his throne because of the intrigues from the court. Here, we are dealing, in fact, with the motif *the world as a theatre*. This motif has been used by many writers in their works along the centuries, starting with the representatives of the Socratic School, followed by Epictetus – *The Handbook*, Marcus Aurelius, Lope de Vega, Quevado, Calderon. The motif *the world as a theatre* appears in most of the Shakespearean plays: *Hamlet, The Merchant of Venice, The Tempest* or *Macbeth*.

"*Better a witty fool, than a foolish wit*" is a remark of the Buffoon from Shakespeare's comedy *Twelfth Night* (Act 1, Scene 5, extracted from SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 695). The meaning of these words is similar with the meaning of the following proverb: *Better lose with the valiant, than win with the wicked.*

"*Brutus, thou sleep'st. Awake, and see thyself*" are the words extracted from a letter that Brutus received, in the tragedy *Julius Caesar*, Act 2, Scene 1 (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 606). It is said that, after the battle whose end led to the recognition of Julius Caesar as the only ruler of the Roman Empire, Brutus, who was considered the most feared opponent of the dictatorship, started to receive several "notes", which were meant to make him take prompt action. These words are usually addressed to someone who is urged to take action, to take up arms, by appealing to his patriotic duty. Brutus's name can be replaced by the name of the person whom you address to.

"*Cowards die many times before their death*" are the well-known words from Shakespeare's tragedy *Julius Caesar*. In Act 2, Scene 2, Calpurnia, Caesar's wife, feeling that a great danger is about to rush upon Caesar, asks him not to leave the house, as he might be killed. Caesar answers: "*Cowards die many times before their death / The valiant never taste of death but once*" (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 606). These words are used whenever someone wants to brand cowardice and praise bravery.

"*Experience is by industry achieved* is the advice that Antony gives his servant Panthino in Shakespeare's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Act 1, Scene 3 (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 6). These words emphasize the value of experience and represent a stimulus to do one's best in order to accumulate much of it.

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"*Frailty, thy name is woman*" are the famous words extracted from Hamlet's monologue, Act 1, Scene 2 (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 658). The unfortunate prince of Denmark, indignant with his mother, the Queen, who has remarried only a month after her husband's funeral, utters these words in a bitter tone. These words are addressed to a woman who commits a sin.

"*Get thee to a nunnery, Ophelia!*" says Hamlet to his fiancée in Act 3, Scene 1 (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 670). The unfortunate prince of Denmark utters these words in tragic circumstances. Nowadays these words maintain their original meaning, whenever they are quoted: an appeal to repentance.

"*Here was a Caesar!*" are Antony's words from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (Act 3, Scene 2). This line is often accompanied by the next one, namely: "*When comes such another?*" (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 617) Its initial meaning was that Caesar behaved like a Caesar, that is like an emperor. But in the course of time this expression has acquired a wider meaning. It is now used when referring to a man who hasn't an equal successor after his decline or his death.

"*He was a man*" says Hamlet about his father, Act 1, Scene 2 (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 658), expressing his regret about his beloved father's death. These words are used today to describe a person endowed with noble virtues and wonderful attributes.

"*Home-keeping yout have ever homely wits*" is the first line extracted from Shakespeare's comedy *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Valentine addresses himself to Proteus, who is detained in Verona by "the sweet glances" of a young girl: "*I rather would entreat thy company / To see the wonders of the world abroad / Than, living dully sluggardized at home …*" (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 3) The meaning of these lines is evident: you go out, you see the world and thus you become a more experienced human being. Therefore this proverb can be cited whenever somebody, owing to the lack of contact with the world, becomes a narrow-minded person.

"*Honest Iago!*" are the words uttered by Othello, Act 5, Scene 2 (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 851), when he truly believed in the honesty of this servant of his. On the other hand, Iago is known as the prototype of the dishonest, perfidious, designing human being. By making use of the antiphrasis, these Shakespearean words are ironically addressed to those shameless intriguers who, by pretending to be your friends in order to make you become indebted to them, betray your trust.

"*I am not what I am*" says Iago in the first Scene from *Othello* (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 821), by confessing that he doesn't serve his master out of love and duty, but only to accomplish his secret plans. These words may be appropriate to describe a person who is not what he / she seems to be.

Iago is one of the main characters from the play *Othello*. His name has become synonymous with a horrid intriguer, who has no scruples. By implanting the feeling of jealousy in Othello's soul, Iago drives the latter to despair: he kills Desdemona and then commits suicide.

"*Jesters do oft prove prophets*" is one of Shakespeare's well-known adages, extracted from *King Lear* (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 971) In Act 5, Scene 3, Regan, one of Lear's daughters, utters this wise saw, while talking to her sister Goneril. This adage is cited whenever a little joke forecasts a big truth.

"*Men should be, what they seem; or those that be not, would they might seem none*" are Shakespeare's famous words from *Othello* (Act 3, Scene 3). These words are uttered by the well-known intriguer Iago, who implants the feeling of jealousy in Othello's soul. The words refer to lieutenant Cassio, of whom Iago implies that he is

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Desdemona's lover; Othello is questioning the truthfulness of Iago's words: Cassio seems to be a honest man. This moment Iago replies: "*Men should be, what they seem; or those that be not, would they might seem none*" (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 835) These words emphasize Shakespeare's creed according to which the literary production must always present the world just like it really is. As Eminescu used to say, "Shakespeare has spoken about the man just like he really is. His drunkard is a drunkard, his hero is a hero, his madman is a madman, his skeptical person is a skeptical person and every man is described according to his character, as People conceive as they see, and Shakespeare belonged to his people, above all." (FAMILIA, VI, No 3, 1870: 25-28).

"*Mercy but murders, pardoning those that kill*" are the Prince's words from Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 3, Scene1, (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: after Romeo has killed Tybalt in a duel, because the latter had murdered his good friend Mercutio. These words are used whenever we advise someone not to show any mercy when dealing with somebody who has committed a serious sin.

"*Much ado about nothing*" is the title of one of Shakespeare's well-known comedies. This adage has become a proverb in many languages and it is used whenever somebody is making a fuss about something of no importance.

"*Patience is for poltroons*" is a line from Shakespeare's *Henry VI* (Part III, Act 1, Scene 1). The play describes the battles from the 15th century between the English reigning families, which have been known as "the Wars of the Roses". The noblemen who supported Henry (and who used to wear red roses on their hats), having in view to annihilate the partisans of the Duke of York (the white roses), want to take prompt action. The king asks them to be patient. Lord Clifford replies: "*Patience for poltroons*" (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 93) Yet, Shakespeare says in *Othello*, through Iago's words: "*How poor are they that ha' not patience*", Act 2, Scene 3 (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 833). The meaning of these words is similar to that of the proverb: "*Patient men win the day*" or "*He that can stay, obtains*"

"*Something is rotten in the state of Denmark*" is a well-known line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 4 (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 661) It is uttered by Marcellus, an officer who sees the strange shadow of Hamlet's father, meaning that unusual things are happening in Denmark. But Denmark has achieved a generic sense in the course of time; it can be any country where strange and bad things are happening; it can also be a factory where something is wrong, or a family dominated by a vice, etc.

"*The rest is silence*" are the last words which Hamlet utters before he dies: Act 5, Scene 2 (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 688). These words have become an adage by which it is understood that there is nothing left, nothing to follow: an endless silence.

"*This nothing's more than matter*" is Laertes's answer, when Ophelia gives him a forget-me-not flower and asks him to think always of her: Act 4, Scene 5 (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 680). The meaning of these words is that sometimes small things, with no material importance, can have a special emotional value.

"*To be or not to be; that is the question*" is the first line extracted from Hamlet's well-known monologue: Act 3, Scene 1 (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 669). This expression is sometimes diminished to a half and its constitutive components are used separately: the first part "*to be or not to be*" expresses one's incapacity of coming through a difficult situation, while the second part "*that is the question*" is used to express an hesitation, an uncertainty.

"*Tooth of time*", extracted from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*: Act 5, Scene 1 (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 810), is a famous metaphor used to designate time that goes by and never comes back.

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"*We know what we are, but know not what we may be*" says Ophelia to the king, whom she considers an accomplice to his father's death: *Hamlet*, Act 4, Scene 5 (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 679). These words are quoted whenever we want to underline the fact that man never knows what to expect, what will his future look like.

"*What's in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other word would smell as sweet*" are two famous lines extracted from Shakespeare's well-known tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*: Act 2, Scene 1 (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 345). During their poetical date from the Capulets' garden, Juliet tells Romeo these words, the meaning of which being very much alike to the proverb: "*It is not the name that makes the gentleman.*"

"*Words pay no debts*" is a line from Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (Act 3, Scene 2). When Troilus says that he is speechless, Pandarus, Cressida's uncle, replies: "*Words pay no debts; give her deeds*" (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 731). This line is equivalent in meaning to the proverbs: "*Deeds not words*" or "*Actions speak louder than words*"

As we have noticed so far, Shakespeare gave rise to a lot of famous words and quotations, distinguishing himself as a great producer of speech. Certain expressions used by Shakespeare in his plays had been known from times immemorial, especially from the Bible and the Latin or Greek writers. The following adages are significant in this sense:

- "*Achilles' spear*" – the legend says that the King of Mysia (an old region in Asia Minor), having been hurt by Achilles' spear, consulted the oracle which told him that his wound could be healed only by the man who had injured him. And, then, Ulysses prepares a sort of ointment from the spear's rust and, indeed, the King has recovered from his injure. Thus, Achilles' spear has had at first the power to heal the one whom he wounded. Later, it has acquired a special meaning: it has been used to designate something that may do not only good but also it may do harm. The word is said to be just like Achilles' spear: it may hurt but it may also bring comfort. Shakespeare used this expression in *Henry VI*, Part II: "*… like to Achilles' spear, / Is able with change to kill and cure.*" (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 86)
- "*at sixes and sevens*" – the expression has been used in the 14th century by Geoffrey Chaucer in his *Troylus and Cryseyde*, which proves that the phrase had been known before 1375, the year in which this play was written, as Chaucer does not explain its meaning. It is said that the explanation can be found in King James's Bible, where the quote from Job (5: 19): "*he shall deliver thee in six troubles; yea, in seven shall no evil touch thee*" contains this expression, the meaning of which is different from the meaning with which we use this expression today. The phrase refers to those situations characterized by disorder, confusion, even chaos. It is also used when talking about some people who find themselves in such a situation and do not know how to handle it. Shakespeare used this expression in a slightly modified form in the play *Richard III*: "*to be left at six and seven*".
- "*by the skin of one's teeth*" is an idiom which refers to a success which is hard to obtain or to somebody who has escaped a danger or has avoided a disaster. This expression originates in the story of Job from the Old Testament. In British English, the expression appears in the 17th century in Shakespeare's *Othello*, being used by the main character, Othello, when referring to some dangerous situations in which he was involved.
- "*full of beans*" – the expression characterizes a very energetic and lively person and has been used with this sense starting from the 19th century. In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* we find the expression with reference to horses that, when

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fed with beans, had much more energy: "*I jest to Oberon, and make him smile / When I a fat and bean-fed horse beguile, / Neighing in likeness of a filly foal.*" In slang, a horse which was fed in this way was called "beany", hence "full of beans" designates a healthy human being.

- "*the garden of the Hesperides*": in Greek mythology, the Hesperides are three beautiful nymphs who tend a blissful garden, where either a single tree or a grove of immortality-giving golden apples grew. Not trusting the nymphs, Hera also placed in the garden a fierce, hundred-headed dragon named Ladon, as an additional safeguard. With the revival of classical allusions in the Renaissance, the garden took on the name of its nymphs. Shakespeare invokes in his *Love's Labour's Lost* (Act 4, Scene 3) the garden of the Hesperides, through Biron's words, who is talking about the magis powers of love: "*For valour, is not love a Hercules, / Still climbing trees in the Hesperides?*" (SHAKESPEARE, 1930: 295).

- "*sweet tooth*" is an idiom which designates a person who likes sweets. Several centuries ago, the word "tooth" had also the meaning of "taste" and, as a verb, meant "to eat". Chaucer says: "keep it for your own tooth". In Shakespeare's play *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, a character talks about his lover's flaws, the girl having no tooth in her mouth, as she used to have "a sweet tooth" (meaning she liked sweets).

We consider that this survey will be very helpful for anyone who wants to correctly use some of Shakespeare's most famous adages, as many people incorrectly interpret these famous words, not knowing the true meaning or background behind Shakespeare's speech. William Shakespeare is probably the most famous of all Englishmen. One of the things he is famous for is the effect he had on the development of the Early Modern English language. For example, without even realizing it, our everyday speech is full of words and phrases invented by Shakespeare. The author had a talent for writing about the struggles people face; his stories combine conflicts with which both the Kings and peasants could identify; his plots mirror people's every day lives and encourage the audience to chose good over evil. Shakespeare's plots are present in movies, television shows or books. They have become so common that we may not realize they were first introduced by Shakespeare. Among these, we may include: mistaking the identity of one person for another person (like in *A Comedy of Errors*); two young people from rival families falling in love (*Romeo and Juliet*); a person torn between loyalty and revenge (*Hamlet*); an evil person who dies because of his/her own wrongdoing (*Macbeth*). Clarity of expression and the use of ordinary diction partly account for the fact that many of Shakespeare's phrases have become proverbial in everyday speech, even among people who have never read the plays. It is also significant that the passages most often quoted are usually from plays written around 1600 and after, when his language became more subtle and complex.

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