

Why Is Shakespeare Great?

by [Mark Alexander](#) (May 2026)



Noctes Ambrosianae (Walter Sickert, 1906)

Imagine the door to a university lecture hall is open. You enter late, seeing that the professor has been speaking for some time, standing behind a podium using lecture notes.

He does not look up when you enter. Only half the seats are taken. He wears a worn gray tweed jacket, faded blue shirt, and a darker blue, thin tie. His mottled gray-white hair splays out in a classic Einstein.

A handful of students watch you enter and sit at the back. They look like first-year students. Bored, fidgety, a couple sleeping. One handsome young woman with short black hair, milk chocolate skin, wearing a black dress and black lipstick, has her hand raised, arm waving slightly, supporting it with her other hand. She looks like she had been waiting awhile.

"...presents the reader with many challenges, not the least of which is Elizabethan diction and Shakespeare's poetic compression. But every reader willing to take the time will discover a bounty of humanistic treasures." The professor stops and looks up at her over his reading glasses. "Yes?" One word conveyed his lack of good cheer. This was a freshman lecture hall. Questions were for upper division students.

"I'm sorry, professor, but I just don't get it," she says, exuding the sweet arrogance and mimicry of intellectual social-media youth. "Since Shakespeare merely represents the view of the classic white-male Eurocentric patriarchy, one that is hundreds of years old—in a dated vocabulary that's hard to understand—what is his relevance today? I mean, what could Shakespeare possibly have to say to me, a Black-Hispanic lesbian?"

As she speaks, the professor's eyes glaze and his head lowers slowly until he is staring down at his podium. He gives every appearance of being an old man in constant mental and physical pain. Several students murmur at least partial agreement. The professor stands silent for almost a full minute before turning to the blackboard. He picks up the chalk with a trembling hand and writes two words on the board—*chair* and *stool*. He turns and stares at her. He speaks softly.

"Would you say, Miss..."

"Ms. Powers."

"Would you say, Mzzz Powers, that the words *chair* and *stool* distinguish two distinct things?"

“Uh, I think ... yes, of course.” Where was this going?

“And do you think, *Mzzz Powers*, that these represent a distinction worth preserving? For example, if I were to ask you to bring me a chair and you brought me a stool, would we have reason to believe there existed between us some failure of communication?”

“Yes,” she says confidently.

“What would be the nature of the failure?”

“Uhh ... a chair normally has a back for support while a stool does not.”

“Good. So, you concede, *Mzzz Powers*, that vocabulary helps us more clearly distinguish the specific differences between like things?”

“Yes.”

“Is it a good thing to distinguish more clearly the specific differences between like things?”

“I suppose.”

“And that it would be better to possess a mind with a larger vocabulary than a mind with a smaller one?” Although he still speaks softly, the air begins to thicken.

“But just because someone has a better vocabulary doesn’t mean that they are a better person.” She speaks less confidently now.

“*Mzzz Powers*,” he says a little bit louder. “If we are going to understand each other, it is best that you respond to what I *actually* say rather than what you *think* I am saying. I did not say anything about a *better* vocabulary having anything to do with being a *better* person. I asked if *you* thought it *better to possess* a mind with a *larger* vocabulary rather than

a *mind* with a *smaller* vocabulary. Especially since you have already conceded that it is a good thing to more clearly distinguish the specific differences between like things. Or do you see another way of distinguishing specific differences in ways other than a versatile and specific vocabulary?"

"No."

"Mzzz Powers, suppose you and I walked into a garden, and while I was a novice in gardening, you were an expert gardener who had a command of the technical language and knowledge of botany and gardening. Would our experience of a particular garden be any different?"

"Uh..." She begins to sense the trap being set for her. She tries to avoid it. "Yes, a little. We would both see the same thing, but I would probably be more knowledgeable about it if you asked me questions."

"No, Mzzz Powers," he says preparing to close the trap. His face is reddening. His voice gets louder. "I'm afraid you are mistaken. We would not be seeing the same garden at all. I would see pretty flowers, maybe some trees and grass. I may be able to tell the difference between a rose and a tulip, but that is all. I would see the mere surface of the garden. It's mere appearance. But you, Mzzz Powers... You would see an entirely different garden. You would be able to penetrate its depths. You would be able to recognize not only the different flowers—the carnations and snap dragons and pansies and hyacinths and lilies—you would also recognize the relative health of each of those flowers. You would recognize any pests or diseased plants. You would be able to spot where each plant and flower was in its life cycle. By their arrangement and care, you would know their past. In some cases, whether they were recently planted. You would know how much the person who tends the garden knows about his or her occupation. You would also know the difference between annuals and perennials. And this knowledge would allow you to see not only the present

garden, but the *future* of that garden. You could predict its course and suggest actions to alter that course. No, Mzzz Powers, you and I would not see the same garden at all. Because a true and rich vocabulary opens one to higher levels of perceptual and conceptual awareness. A specific vocabulary rewards you with a greater awareness, and the possibility of a causal consciousness. The ability to distinguish true causes and their array of effects. And, were you so inclined, you would naturally begin seeing the world in terms of the garden. You would begin constructing metaphors and similes, perhaps even analogies, connecting life to that garden in an array of subtle similarities.”

He pauses and surveys the room. Here is the theater and the time is now for his signature solo performance that built in power. Mzzz Powers had lost the desire to respond.

“Do you know the number of distinct words in the average person’s vocabulary, Mzzz Powers? About three thousand words, if all forms of a word—like run, ran, running—counted as one. Three thousand words, enough to get an average person through the day, and through their lifetime. Do you know how many distinct words are in the King James Version of the Bible? Around four thousand three hundred, not counting names. That means that all the history and philosophy and meaning, all the variety of ideas expressed in the Bible, can be transmitted in a vocabulary of forty-three hundred words. Enough to challenge the average reader. Soon we will get to John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. John Milton commanded an incredible vocabulary. He mastered several languages, including Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, and French. He wrote not only epic poetry but many rigorous political tracts. Some of his sentences are so powerful and complex in their vocabulary, grammar, and meaning that they contain several dozen clauses. John Milton was a genius who mastered and crafted meaning out of a vocabulary of almost *eight thousand words*, more than almost all living writers.”

He pauses and looks out through slitted eyes. He has just finished climbing a hill. Now he turns to the mountain.

“But Shakespeare,” he says, chuckling. “Shakespeare exists in his own genus. When a rhetorician reads Shakespeare, *she*,” he glares the sarcastic concession at Mzzz Powers, “points out that Shakespeare was a master rhetorician, who knew not only all the technical terms, ancient and modern, but was a master practitioner who applied that knowledge throughout his poems and plays, in ways that have stood as examples for generations to follow. When a gardener reads Shakespeare, *she* says that Shakespeare must have been a gardener, because he not only displays the technical terminology of botany and gardening and herbology, but he also demonstrates the kind of knowledge that comes from working in or studying closely a sophisticated English garden. When a lawyer reads Shakespeare, *she* tells us that Shakespeare must have had a legal education because he not only displays an astonishing range and accuracy with his use of legal terms, be he also commands an understanding of the history and philosophy of law. And you can point to other professions: actor, soldier, physician, courtier, historian, politician.”

He pauses, taking a breath, and when he begins again, the tempo and volume increase.

“But that’s not all. In his plays, he explores the range and depth of human emotions and experience. He explores love, but not just the young romantic love of Romeo and Juliet. He explores love between siblings, and parent and child, and comrades in arms, young love, middle-aged love, old love. Love between the low and the low, the low and the high, the high and the high, false love, true love, jaded love, betrayed love, self-love, love of good, and love of indulgence. Like turning a diamond in the light, he explores every facet of love and hate and envy and greed and lust and jealousy and innocence and sweetness and revenge, and a hundred subtle emotional and intellectual states of which you have yet to

take conscious stock. His capacious mind wandered everywhere, and in almost every way he has arrived there before you have, articulating it with a mastery that leaves later writers sick with wondering what territory of the human heart, human intellect, and human action is left to explore. He seems to have experienced the full range and depth of common human experience and encapsulated that experience more beautifully than any other. Shakespeare, *Mzzz Powers*, displays a vocabulary of over *twenty-two thousand words*, almost three times Milton's vocabulary, and *you wonder why you find reading him challenging, and you dare to wonder if Shakespeare has anything to teach you?"*

She sits frozen, unable to respond to the blast that has everyone stunned. In the spacious silence, the professor begins speaking softly again, with a sardonic smile.

"May I suggest to you, *Mzzz Powers*, that you have a choice. You can continue to dwell on the surface of life, holding up external appearances as if they were everything, parroting the rhymes and rhythms of a politicized consciousness, flaccid and without true self-animation, smug in the knowledge that you have comfortably given yourself over to a group numbness, submitting to mere external authority—or maybe, just maybe, with personal effort, a healthy skepticism, and a sense of individual exploration, you may become your own authority, by expanding your mind in a constant effort to comprehend Shakespeare's. May I suggest that until you are well along into that journey, your mind and emotions will remain susceptible to every sophistic thought that knocks on your door, seeking to enslave you with its mere appearance of originality. It's time, *Mzzz Powers*, that you begin feeding on Shakespeare rather than on that damned social media fast food."

He pauses.

"That's all for today, class."

[Table of Contents](#)

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