

# SHAKESPEAREAN CROSSWORDS

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It is fairly well known that, according to the generally accepted history of the puzzles, crosswords were first created in the USA in 1913 and crossed the Atlantic to Great Britain some eleven years later. In fact, a study of much of literature shows this to be false, and reveals innumerable earlier references to crosswords. The works of William Shakespeare provide a particularly rich source of such allusions.

In "Measure for Measure", for instance, he has a Boy speak of

"Lights that do mislead,"

and Suffolk, in "Henry IV, part II", sums up the whole essence of a good crossword in the phrase

"Words, sweetly placed."

There are unfavourable references, too. In "Antony and Cleopatra" Antony has clearly had more than enough of the puzzles when he cries

"No more light answers!"

Three of the plays contain scenes in which crosswords are about to be, or are actually in the process of being, solved. There is the scene in Act III of "As You Like It" with Rosalind asking Celia for help with the solving of a particular clue. The latter is unable to supply a suitable one-word expression, and can offer only a phrase. This gives rise to Rosalind's exclamation

"Answer me in one word!"

Bolingbroke, in Act I of "Richard II", finally manages to finish a puzzle after a long struggle over one particular clue.

"How long a time lies in one little word!"

And at one point in "Twelfth Night" Olivia settles down to relax with a crossword. As soon as she looks at the diagram, however, she is dismayed to discover that someone has beaten her to it and has already entered the answers in the squares.

"Would they were blank, rather than filled!"

It is not only in his plays that Shakespear refers to crosswords. Sonnet 76 is written in the guise of a composer of cryptic clues explaining his art.

"So all my best is dressing old words new,"

while in Sonnet 77, approaching the subject from a different angle, he offers advice to solvers. He urges them not to try to work crosswords in their heads, but

"What the memory can not contain,  
Commit to these waste blanks."

At least three of the Bard's characters are composers of crosswords. Bardolph, in "Henry IV, part I," is announced by Poins

"O, 'tis our setter,"

and in "Henry IV, part III," Queen Margaret pleads with Warwick

"Peace, proud setter."

The third example is Helena in "All's Well That Ends Well." In Act I, she is complimented by the Countess on a particularly fine example of her work.

"You have wound a goodly clue."

Prize crossword contests were evidently common enough in Elizabethan times for Shakespear to feature one as part of the plot of "Henry IV, part I." This competition is entered by Falstaff who unfortunately gets one of his answers wrong and so fails by a narrow margin to win. As he is sadly checking the solution, Prince Henry offers him a word of commiseration.

"With a word, out-fac'd you from your prize!"

Strangely enough, crossword puzzles are actually mentioned by name only once in the whole of Shakespear's works. This mention occurs in "Hamlet" where Polonius, puzzled by the Prince's strange behaviour, enquires of Ophelia

"Have you sent him any crossewords of late?"

For some reason, about which scholars have speculated for many years, even this one reference appears only in the First Quarto edition and is omitted from the later Folio versions.