

# Five Famous Shakespeare Quotes You're Probably Taking Out of Context

Shakespeare is often quoted in a way that makes him sound like his works were incredibly serious and philosophical. While it is true that Shakespeare interacts with deep and compelling themes, and some of his plays do have a very somber tone, it's interesting to see how many of his oft-quoted lines actually appear in moments of comic relief. Perhaps we would be wise to take more of these comic lines to heart... in their proper context.

**1. "Though she be but little, she is fierce."** For the sake of full disclosure, I have this quote on a coffee tumbler. Taken from Shakespeare's [A Midsummer Night's Dream](#), it's often used as something of a compliment when it appears on décor. In context, however, this line was certainly intended as an insult.

Thanks to some moonlight madness and fairy juice, four lovers find themselves mixed up and in love with the wrong people. When Hermia realizes that the man she loves is suddenly in love with Helena, things get a little violent between the two ladies. Helena entreats the protection of others, exclaiming,

*When she is angry she is keen and shrewd. She was a vixen when she went to school, and though she be but little, she is fierce.*

**2. "Be not afraid of greatness."** This quote comes from [Twelfth Night](#) and is arguably the funniest moment in any of Shakespeare's plays. Malvolio (whose name literally means "ill will") is a surly, pompous household steward who enjoys bossing the other servants around and reprimanding Sir Toby

and Sir Andrew, both of whom outrank him. In retaliation, Toby, Andrew, Maria, and Feste band together to play a prank on Malvolio. The four forge their Lady's handwriting and write him a letter in which "Olivia" professes her undying love for Malvolio, telling him

*In my stars I am above thee, but be not afraid of greatness. Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon 'em.*

And yes, when performed, the eavesdropping characters have fun "acting out" that line. I'll leave it to your imagination.

**3. "Discretion is the better part of valor."** Taken from Shakespeare's [Henry IV, Part I](#), this quote might be more compelling if it were not uttered from the mouth of Falstaff, one of the most comical (and occasionally crass) characters in Shakespeare's canon. It doesn't help that the reason for Falstaff's observation on valor is that he is attempting to get credit for someone else's act of heroism on the battlefield.

**4. "All the world's a stage."** This is another line uttered by one of Shakespeare's more comical characters. In [As You Like It](#), Jaques is a rather pessimistic and unpleasant fellow, often going out of his way to throw cold water on his companions' (sometimes unwarranted) exuberance. When the exiled Duke, who has decided to make the most of his time hiding in the forest, observes that they are not alone in their misfortunes, and the "universal theater presents more woeful pageants than the scene wherein we play," Jaques responds by observing that all the world's a stage, and then details the meaningless trajectory of each life on that stage.

**5. "If music be the food of love play on!"** This quote is also from [Twelfth Night](#) and happens to be from another character who has a thing for Olivia. Or at least, that's what he says. Count Orsino claims to be madly in love with Olivia, but in

his “If music be the food of love” speech, he almost completely forgets to mention the woman he claims to be obsessed with. As the story unfolds, Orsino seems to be more in love with the idea of being in love than anything else.

Nearly every high school graduate in America has read at least one Shakespeare play. But even those who have not are quick to quote Shakespeare, since doing so is an easy way to instantly sound credible and cultured. The funny thing is, some of Shakespeare’s most famous and quoted lines are completely taken out of context.

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