
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

Shakespeare Speaks

Give no words but mum



Narrator

It was the 23rd of April. William Shakespeare's daughter and his actor friends Robert Harley and Thomas Swann are at the Duck and Whistle. They're getting ready for a celebration. Bess the barmaid is in charge.

Bess

Now have we got everything? Beer, ale... Where's that Mary Bassett? She's supposed to be bringing the pies...

Mary

Here I am, pies and all! I've brought some lovely meat pies and I've got Mr Will's favourite here: a nice cherry pie.

All

Ooohhh lovely, he'll like that, lovely...

Daughter

Oh, I'm so excited Mary! I love parties! Isn't it wonderful having a party for Father's birthday!

Mary

Now don't you go telling Mr Will before he gets here, Miss Shakespeare, remember: it's a surprise. Like John Hume says in your father's play Henry VI part II: **Seal up your lips, and give no words but mum...**

Thomas Swann as John Hume

Seal up your lips, and give no words but mum:
The business asketh silent secrecy.

Daughter

Give no words but mum... I promise, I won't say a word to anyone. Really, I won't!

Narrator

We'll leave them there for now. The exact date of William Shakespeare's birth is not recorded, but it's generally believed that the most likely date was Sunday the 23rd of April, which, interestingly, was also the date of his death, in 1616, at the age of 52. The phrase **Give no words but mum**, simply means: don't tell anyone - it's a secret. These days, it's usually simplified to just **keep mum**. Take Australian news website 9News, writing about Mark Hamill, the Star Wars actor, who spoke of how he had to keep the Star Wars storyline secret. The headline was:

Clip 1

Mark Hamill to keep mum amid Star Wars Skywalker speculation

Narrator

Another version of the phrase is **Mum's the word**.

Clip 2

Don't tell anyone you saw me here. Mum's the word!

Mary

Ssshhh everybody, here he comes now!

All

Quick, hide, behind the bar, get down, he'll see you...

Will

Good afternoon Bess, a pint of your finest... Bess? Hello? Where is everyone?!

All

Surprise!!!! Happy birthday!!!

Daughter

Happy birthday father!

Will

Daughter?! Is all this for me?!

Daughter

Yes, father, it is!

Thomas Swann

Happy birthday Will!

Will

Thank you, Thomas.

Mary

Happy birthday, Mr Will. Have some cherry pie.

Bess

Here Mr Will, pint of ale for you.

Will

Well now! To party, or... no. Let's party!

All

Hooray!