
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

Shakespeare Speaks

Greek to me



Narrator

It's October 1599. Shakespeare has finished writing his history play Julius Caesar and is visiting a fair in his home town of Stratford, with his daughter. She has just had her fortune told...

Will

Now, dear daughter, what did Old Mother Howard say? What does the future hold for us, I wonder?

Daughter

Oh father, Mother Howard talked a lot, but she had such a strange accent – I couldn't understand a word she said!

Will

You're just like Casca in my play Julius Caesar.

Daughter

Casca? He's one of the men that kills Caesar, the Roman general! How can you say that, father – I'm not a murderer!!!

Will

Dear daughter, Casca was in a group of people who were listening to the great Roman speaker Cicero. But Cicero was speaking Greek, so Casca couldn't understand him.

Daughter

Oh... why was Cicero speaking Greek?

Will

That's what educated people spoke in Roman times. Casca says that some of the people listening to Cicero could actually understand him. Here are the lines: ...those that understood him smiled at one another...

Thomas Swann as Casca

... those that understood him smiled at one another and shook their heads; but, for mine own part, it was Greek to me.

Daughter

So Casca had no idea what Cicero was talking about. Just like me and Mother Howard!

Narrator

We'll leave them there for now. Fortune tellers were common in Shakespeare's day, and they appear in many of his plays including Macbeth, the Comedy of Errors and Julius Caesar, in which the fortune teller warns Caesar to "beware the Ides of March" – the day on which Caesar was eventually assassinated by his closest friends. The phrase **It was Greek to me** has become **It's all Greek to me** in modern English, and it's used when something – not just a foreign language – is difficult to understand. For example, in a report about the 2015 Greek debt crisis, UK newspaper The Daily Telegraph carried the headline:

Clip 1

It's all Greek to me: a glossary of Eurozone crisis jargon

Clip 2

I'll never understand the rules of cricket: out for a duck, silly mid-off, googlies... It's all Greek to me!

Will

Now tell me, daughter, did you understand anything Old Mother Howard said?

Daughter

Yes! She talked about you, father. She said that you're going to be the most famous Englishman of all time! ...but I think she was making it up.

Will

Oh no, no, no... I'm sure she's absolutely right about that ... She's obviously a very gifted woman. What shall we look at now, daughter?

Daughter

Can we go to the gold stall father? Pleeeeeeease???

Will

I didn't need a fortune teller to predict that! To gold, or not to gold: that is the question.