
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

Shakespeare Speaks

Spotless reputation



Narrator

It was a spring morning in 1601. William Shakespeare is visiting Queen Elizabeth I of England. She's not very happy today...

Queen Elizabeth I

I will not allow my enemies to live. Tomorrow that ill-faced, murderous coward the Earl of Essex will die, and the people will know that I commanded it.

Will

Very good, your Majesty.

Queen Elizabeth I

Your players will perform Richard II for me tomorrow.

Will

A great honour, your Majesty.

Queen Elizabeth I

Even though they performed that same play for the filthy, crooked Earl of Essex while he was planning to kill me...

Will

Your Majesty...

Queen Elizabeth I

I really ought to punish you and your players for that, Shakespeare – I should cut off all your heads, or at least imprison you in the Tower...

Will

Your Majesty...

Queen Elizabeth I

Lucky for you that I am a merciful Queen – but I am not weak. I will not allow anyone to speak badly of my character or my actions. I am Queen of England and my reputation is

everything. My enemies must fear me and respect me and the people must love me. Gossips must be silenced and traitors must be punished. Do you not agree?

Will

Your Majesty is the wisest of queens. A good reputation is everything. Indeed, in my play, Richard II, Thomas Mowbray says: "My dear dear lord, The purest treasure..."

Thomas Mowbray

My dear dear lord,
The purest treasure mortal times afford
Is spotless reputation:

Queen Elizabeth I

Well said, Shakespeare – a spotless reputation is truly the most important and precious thing in any life. You may go.

Will

Your Majesty...

Narrator

We'll leave them there for now. In Shakespeare's day, your reputation – the things other people believed and said about your character and actions – was very important. In fact, William Shakespeare's own reputation as a writer was so good that during his lifetime, several dishonest publishers published other, lesser writers' work, pretending that it was Shakespeare's. These days, the phrase **spotless reputation** describes a person or organisation that has a good, clean character and behaves decently and honestly. Take news website Scottish Herald, discussing the 2015 Volkswagen emissions data falsification scandal. It said:

Clip 1

Analysts have also asked whether the revelations will cause irreversible damage to Volkswagen's previously spotless reputation.

Clip 2

Another athlete caught taking drugs? I'm surprised at this one though – she always had a spotless reputation.

Will

Robert, Thomas, give me some ale... we're doing Richard II, tomorrow. And it'd better be good, or it could be the Tower.

Robert Harley & Thomas Swann

Oh dear. Oh no. To the tower, or not to the tower: that is the question.