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# BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

## Shakespeare Speaks

### Wild-geese chase

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#### **Narrator**

It was early in the evening. William Shakespeare is at home. He's expecting a visit from his actor friend Robert Harley.

#### **Robert Harley**

Good evening, Mr Shakespeare.

#### **Will**

Welcome, welcome Robert! Come in.

#### **Daughter**

Good evening Mister Harley...

#### **Robert Harley**

Miss Shakespeare... I'm sorry I'm late - I was out horse riding. It was wonderful - so fast, so exciting!

#### **Will**

Ahhh, the wild-geese chase! Take care when you race that way young Robert, we don't want to spoil those good looks of yours...

#### **Daughter**

Why is it called a wild-geese chase? It's a horse race! They're not chasing geese!

#### **Will**

Dear daughter, a wild-geese chase is indeed a kind of horse race. The riders have to follow one horse, keeping up with him wherever he goes, just as wild geese follow the leader when they fly.

#### **Daughter**

Ohh... I expect you kept up with him very well, Robert...!

### Will

Thank you, daughter. Now to the play: Romeo and Juliet. Robert, you are playing Mercutio, Romeo's best friend. In this scene, there is a different kind of wild-goose chase. This chase is all about words and jokes. Mercutio and Romeo are competing with each other: each of them trying to tell the cleverest and funniest jokes.

### Robert

A competition of intelligence, of wits and quick thinking!

### Daughter

Mercutio will win, won't he!? He is handsome - and clever!

### Will

Mercutio is indeed quick-witted, but Romeo is better - much better, and Mercutio knows it - so he gives up this wild-goose chase before it even starts, saying: Nay, if thy wits run the wild-goose chase...

### Robert as Mercutio

Nay, if thy wits run the wild-goose chase, I have done, for thou hast more of the wild goose in one of thy wits than, I am sure, I have in my whole five.

### Narrator

We'll leave them there for now. Romeo and Juliet is a play about young love, but it also has lots of fighting, with both weapons and words. Here, Shakespeare compares Romeo and Mercutio's duelling with words to a wild and dangerous horse race, called a **wild-goose chase**. In modern English, a **wild-goose chase** isn't about horses, or geese: it describes a situation where you foolishly chase after something that is impossible to get - or doesn't exist at all. Take US writer Bryant McGill, who said:

### Clip 1

Endless consumerism sends us on a wild-goose chase for happiness through materialism.

### Clip 2

We looked for the restaurant for hours, but it was a wild-goose chase: turned out that it closed down years ago!

### Robert

So, no wild-goose chase for Mercutio.

### Daughter

You could chase me, though Robert...

### Robert

Oh dear... to chase, or not to chase: that really isn't a question.