
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

Shakespeare Speaks

Wild-geese chase



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

Ohhh... 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.