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-goose 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-goose chase? It’s a horse race! They’re not chasing geese!

Will
Dear daughter, a wild-goose 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.