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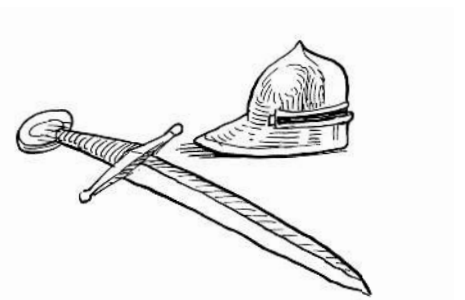
MICHAEL ROSEN'S POCKET SHAKESPEARE



MICHAEL ROSEN'S POCKET SHAKESPEARE

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO THE BEST BITS OF THE BARD

ILLUSTRATED BY

CHRIS RIDDELL

Remembering my parents taking me to see Shakespeare plays – M.R.

For Katy – C.R.

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What's in this book

"Who's there?"	6
Magic and superstition	14
Not fair!	30
Love and heartbreak	46
Sorrow and mourning	62
Troubled minds	80
War and civil strife	96
Scheming and plotting	114
Jealousy, greed and anger	128
Nature and beauty	146
Young and old	158
"Thou art a boil" and other insults	170
Quick-fire quotes	175
"I am thy father's spirit"	182
Index of first lines	184
Index of plays	188

“Who’s there?”

Those two words are the greatest opening of a play ever! And who wrote them? William Shakespeare!

This is a book of Shakespeare. It’s not a book *by* Shakespeare and it’s not a book *about* Shakespeare. It’s a book of pieces that Shakespeare wrote, including that line from *Hamlet*, the greatest opening of a play ever!

You might ask, why do we need such a book?

We can indeed go to see Shakespeare plays performed in a theatre or watch them on TV or in the cinema. We can read the plays. We can read the poems Shakespeare wrote. All true. But the thing about Shakespeare is that he wrote in a way that produced hundreds, if not thousands, of lines of writing that are worth picking out and looking at.

Why might that be?

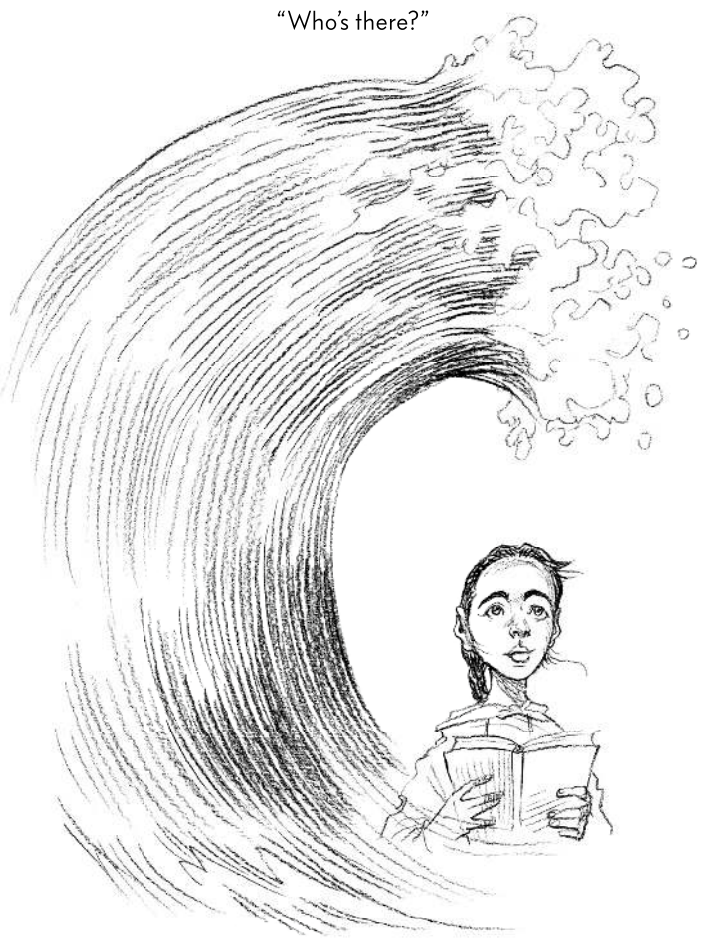
The answer to that lies in what kind of writer he was. Modern plays and films don’t usually try to say in words

a lot about what kind of people we human beings are. They say who we are mostly through action and reaction and in how things turn out. In other words, they get us to think about who we are through the way people do things to each other or say things about each other, often quite quickly.

Shakespeare did something different. Like modern plays and films, there's plenty of action in his plays: plotting, scheming, loving, hating; people being jealous or afraid or regretful; and much more. But here's the interesting thing: in the midst of all that action, the people (the characters) tell us what they're thinking, seeing and hearing.

Just think of one of the most famous speeches in all of Shakespeare's plays, from *Hamlet*. It begins: "To be, or not to be…" The character saying this is Hamlet. At that very moment, he's wondering whether it's worth living. And then, if it's worth living, how should he live? Should he just accept and suffer what life throws at him, or should he kick against it, fight back?

In other words, he's turning over the problem of the meaning and purpose of life itself! Of course, that's



Shakespeare putting those words into a character's mouth. If we take those words away from the play for a moment, it gives us a chance to look at what these lines mean and – most importantly – to get us thinking about them. We might even spend

a bit of time thinking about the "how". How did Shakespeare write? He didn't say "suffer what life throws at you", he said: "suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune". Slings and arrows? That's what we call an image or picture. Who fires these arrows? Shakespeare has Hamlet saying that it's "outrageous fortune". Think about that. You know when you've just had a bit of terrible luck? Shakespeare is calling this "outrageous fortune". Now can you imagine really bad luck firing arrows at you? Do they hurt? Does it feel as if bad luck is trying to do you harm?

But then what's the alternative to suffering? I said "fight back". But Shakespeare doesn't say that. He says "take arms against a sea of troubles". "Take arms" means "get some weapons", but who's the enemy? A "sea of troubles". Not a lot of troubles, or loads of troubles, but a "sea of troubles". Can you imagine that? All your troubles turned into the sea. What kind of sea? Cold? Big waves? One after the other in a never-ending way?

If you're imagining what I'm suggesting, that's how Shakespeare's words and language work.

Another time, it might not be a matter of how we think but a matter of how we feel. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet has fallen in love with Romeo, but then she hears that Romeo belongs to a family that is the enemy of hers. The two families hate each other. They're feuding. Now she's torn. How can she love what she is supposed to hate? How can she hate what she loves? In desperation she says, "wherefore art thou Romeo?" (meaning "why are you Romeo?"). Does this make sense? Not really. Romeo is Romeo because he's Romeo! But because Juliet is caught in this state of betwixt and between, she says something that doesn't really make sense but in a way actually *does* make sense. And it draws us into feeling what it's like to love someone who others say you shouldn't or mustn't love. It's something we feel in the moment rather than understand as if it was a fact.

Then there's another aspect to the way Shakespeare wrote: what theatres were like in his time, more than 400 years ago. They were partly open-air. There was very little on the stage by way of sets – sets are the stuff that's built on the stage to make it look

like a house or a battlefield or whatever. As people saw the plays in daytime, you couldn't dim the lights to make it seem like night. This meant Shakespeare had to get his characters to explain and describe the fact that they were at sea or a new day was beginning or they were out in a terrible storm. But more than that: the characters react to the place they're in. They react against it. The king in *King Lear* was once arrogant and vain. Many things happen that make him regret how he once was. He finds himself outside on a heath in driving rain, so he calls on the weather to be worse. Why would he do that? It's as if he's asking the weather to punish him for having been such a bad king and bad person:

> *Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!*
> *You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout*
> *Till you have drench'd our steeples…*

In *The Tempest*, a native of an island tries to tell two shipwrecked men what an incredible, magical place this island is. The magic happening here is that,

as he is telling the other people how magical it is, he's telling us at the same time. He's telling it in words, because there were no sets or lights or sound effects in Shakespeare's time to help him.

What do you think about words? Can they make us think and feel? Do they get you to compare the things going on in your life with what you read or hear? Do they help you say things that you couldn't quite work out how to say yourself? You know how it is: you have a feeling but can't quite find a way to express it, and then along come somebody else's words, and they seem to do the job for you. Or at least help you find words of your own. This book is about that too.

You'll see that sometimes I've explained what Shakespeare's words mean today. He was writing more than 400 years ago, and the English language has changed since that time. Where you don't think you understand the meaning, you can of course guess. Sometimes it's perfectly all right to get a general feeling of what the lines mean and just enjoy the sound of what the characters are saying.

There's no need to try to read this book all in one

go. It's not that kind of book. It is more for dipping into. You can flick to and fro looking for something that fits your mood. We've put headings to help you do that, and you'll see that I've written a few lines before each piece about who's speaking the words in the play and why they're saying them. There are also some of my favourite songs, insults and one-liners, and brilliant illustrations by Chris Riddell.

If you prefer, you can be even more random than that. Just pick the book up and see what you might find today, as if you're wandering down a street in a town you don't know, window-shopping. Or you can treat the book as if you're in someone's garden and you're wondering what plants and flowers they've got. These are all good ways to read this book – or, if you prefer, why not find another way for it to grab you?

I hope you enjoy it.

Michael Rosen

Magic and superstition

We enjoy fantasy and magic in books, films and games today, but let's ask ourselves a question: did people in Shakespeare's time think in different ways from how we think today? Did they believe in different things from us?

One way of trying to answer these questions is to look at what people wrote at the time, and who better to look at than Shakespeare? In his time, in England, where he lived, nearly everyone was a Christian. Being a Christian then meant (and for some people still does mean) believing that what is written in the Bible is true; it also meant going to church at least once a week; and observing the Christian festivals throughout the year.

But when we look at what characters say in Shakespeare's plays, it seems as if many people also believed in things that aren't in the Bible. We have words for these, such as "superstition", "fantasy" and "magic". Maybe you believe in good luck or fate or think the signs

of the zodiac tell you what kind of person you are. Do you believe it's unlucky to walk under a ladder? What about fairies and ghosts? Do you believe in them?

Two words that might help us here are "pagan" and "heathen". These words have been used to describe beliefs that are not Christian. The official view in Shakespeare's time was that these beliefs were wrong. Yet, at the same time, everyone knew that many people – perhaps most people – believed in such things as ghosts, fairies, magic, fate and luck.

Shakespeare was brilliant at writing about such pagan ideas. I also wonder if he thought that there was some kind of magic in his own writing. He was an actor as well as a writer, and he could see how people watching his plays shouted at actors playing a character as if it was real life: "Don't do it!" "Oh no, he's dead!" and that sort of thing. Is that a kind of belief in magic? Well, I would say, in a way, yes!

So through the magic of his writing, Shakespeare created scenes and characters that invite us to believe in fairies, ghosts, witches and the workings of strange forces. That's who and what you're going to meet now.

In the play *Macbeth* there are three witches. They are not like the witches we meet in fairy tales like *Hansel and Gretel*. These witches are magical sisters who can see the future. They can make spells to help them, and that is what they are doing in this speech. It's great fun to chant this or sing it, or say it like a rap. In *Macbeth* we get a sense that people believed in witches like this, but were also afraid of them.

Double, double, toil and trouble;
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.

Fillet of a fenny snake
In the cauldron boil and bake.
Eye of newt and toe of frog,
Wool of bat and tongue of dog,
Adder's fork and blindworm's sting,
Lizard's leg and howlet's wing,
For a charm of powerful trouble,
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.

Double, double, toil and trouble;
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.

Cool it with a baboon's blood,
Then the charm is firm and good.

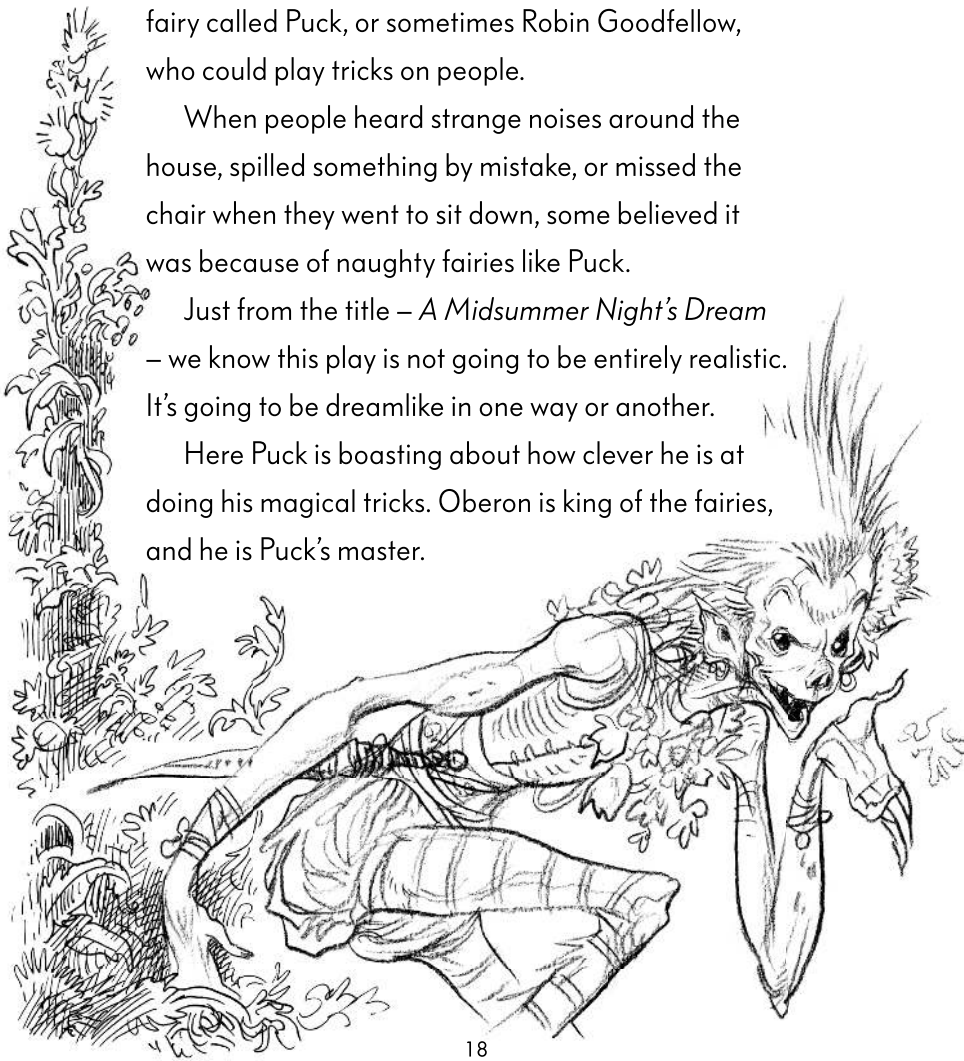
The Witches – *Macbeth,* Act 4 Scene 1

This speech is by Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Shakespeare knew some of his audience really thought that there was a magical fairy called Puck, or sometimes Robin Goodfellow, who could play tricks on people.

When people heard strange noises around the house, spilled something by mistake, or missed the chair when they went to sit down, some believed it was because of naughty fairies like Puck.

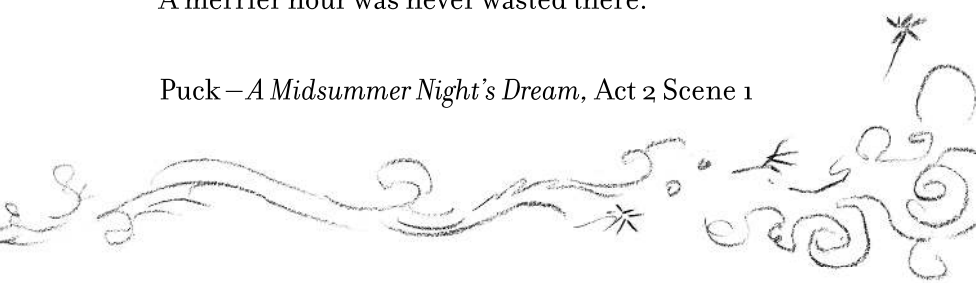
Just from the title – *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – we know this play is not going to be entirely realistic. It's going to be dreamlike in one way or another.

Here Puck is boasting about how clever he is at doing his magical tricks. Oberon is king of the fairies, and he is Puck's master.



I am that merry wanderer of the night.
I jest to Oberon and make him smile
When I a fat and bean-fed horse beguile,
Neighing in likeness of a filly foal.
And sometime lurk I in a gossip's bowl
In very likeness of a roasted crab,
And, when she drinks, against her lips I bob
And on her withered dewlap pour the ale.
The wisest aunt, telling the saddest tale,
Sometime for three-foot stool mistaketh me;
Then slip I from her bum, down topples she
And "Tailor!" cries and falls into a cough,
And then the whole quire hold their hips and laugh
And waxen in their mirth and neeze and swear
A merrier hour was never wasted there.

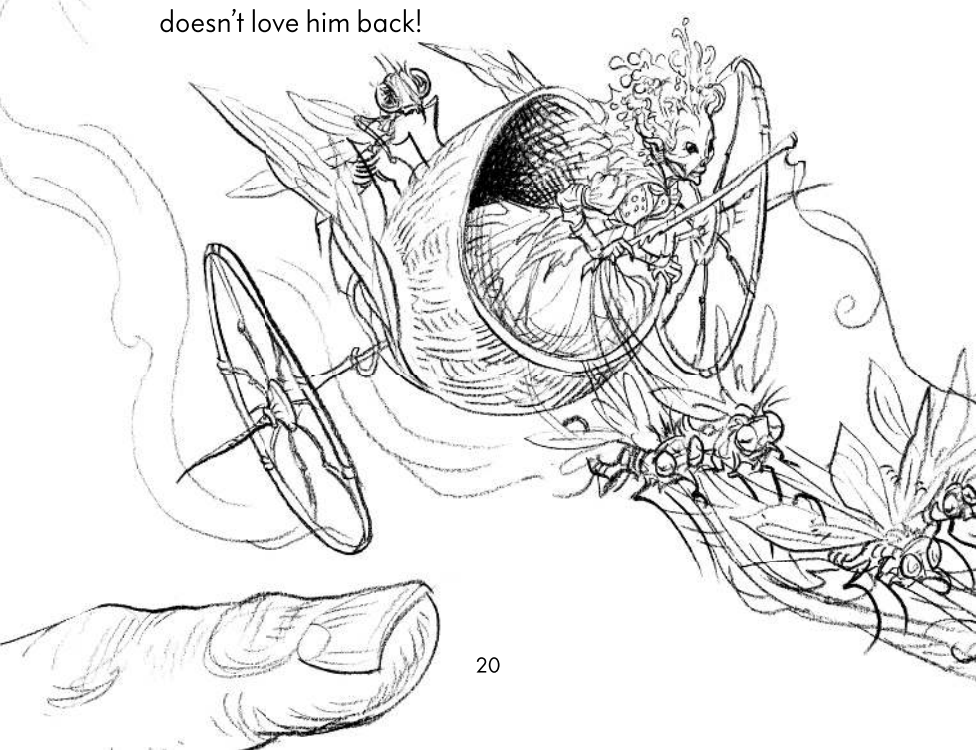
Puck – *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* Act 2 Scene 1



beguile: charm
dewlap: loose skin
quire: group
waxen in their mirth: grow jollier
neeze: sneeze

The fairy character in this speech from *Romeo and Juliet* is called Queen Mab. The person speaking is a young man called Mercutio, who is great friends with Romeo.

When you see this in the theatre, you quickly get the idea that Mercutio is one of those people who can dazzle you with his jokes and stories. In this speech, he is conjuring up a fantastical scene in order to tease Romeo, telling his friends that this fairy character, Queen Mab, has got to Romeo and made him think he is madly in love with Rosaline, a young woman who doesn't love him back!



O, then I see Queen Mab hath been with you.
She is the fairies' midwife, and she comes
In shape no bigger than an agate stone
On the forefinger of an alderman,
Drawn with a team of little atomies
Athwart men's noses as they lie asleep.
Her wagon spokes made of long spiders' legs,
The cover of the wings of grasshoppers,
Her traces of the smallest spider web,
Her collars of the moonshine's watery beams,
Her whip of cricket's bone, the lash of film,
Her wagoner a small grey-coated gnat,
Not so big as a round little worm
Pricked from the lazy finger of a maid.
Her chariot is an empty hazelnut,
Made by the joiner squirrel or old grub,
Time out o' mind the fairies' coachmakers.
And in this state she gallops night by night…
… This is that very Mab.

Mercutio – *Romeo and Juliet,* Act 1 Scene 4

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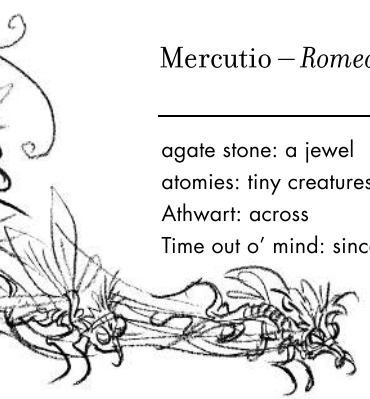
agate stone: a jewel
atomies: tiny creatures
Athwart: across
Time out o' mind: since long ago

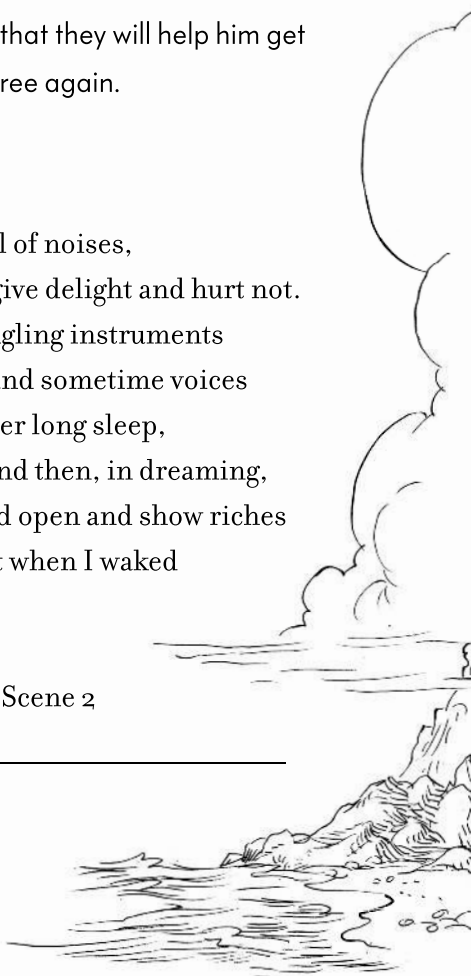


In the play *The Tempest*, there's a character called Caliban, who lives on an island. A duke called Prospero comes to the island, and enslaves Caliban. Prospero can make magic, but there is also something magical about the island itself.

Here Caliban is talking to two men who've come to the island. Caliban is hoping that they will help him get rid of Prospero so he can be free again.

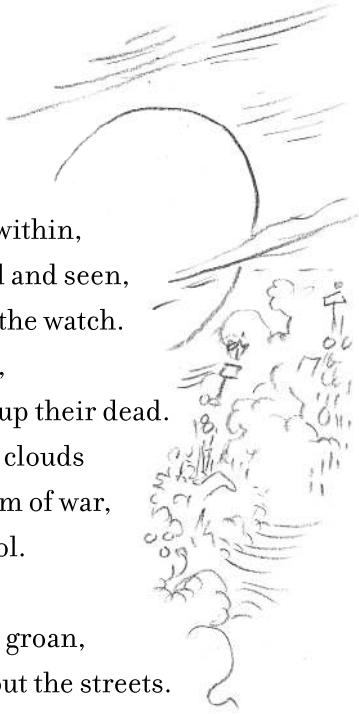
Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again; and then, in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked
I cried to dream again.

Caliban – *The Tempest,* Act 3 Scene 2



afeard: afraid
methought: I thought

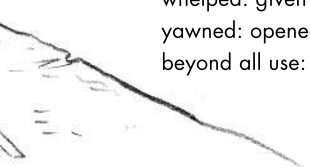
What is an omen? An omen is a sign that people believe tells them what is going to happen. You can have good or bad omens – that is, omens that help you predict good or bad things. In *Julius Caesar* some people plot to kill Caesar. In this speech Caesar's wife, Calpurnia, thinks that she knows bad things are going to happen to Caesar because of events – real or imagined – that she believes are bad omens.



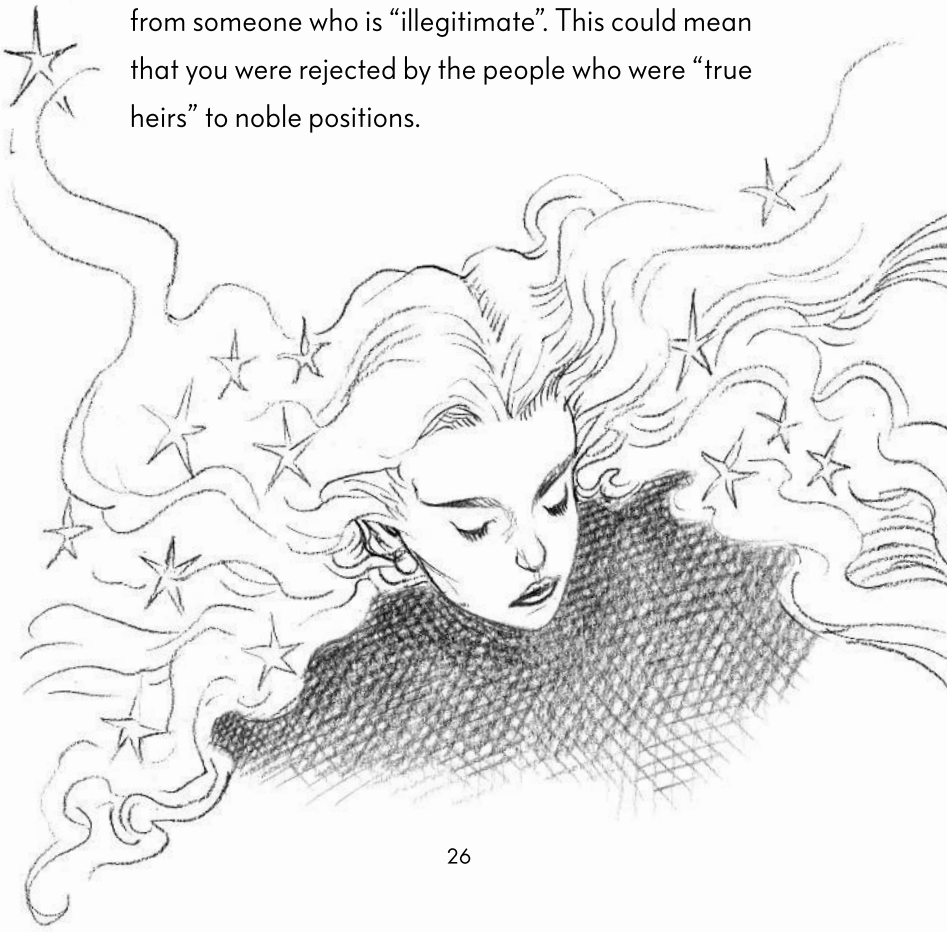
Caesar, I never stood on ceremonies,
Yet now they fright me. There is one within,
Besides the things that we have heard and seen,
Recounts most horrid sights seen by the watch.
A lioness hath whelped in the streets,
And graves have yawned and yielded up their dead.
Fierce fiery warriors fought upon the clouds
In ranks and squadrons and right form of war,
Which drizzled blood upon the Capitol.
The noise of battle hurtled in the air,
Horses did neigh, and dying men did groan,
And ghosts did shriek and squeal about the streets.
O Caesar, these things are beyond all use,
And I do fear them.

Calpurnia – *Julius Caesar,* Act 2 Scene 2

within: indoors
watch: watchmen
whelped: given birth
yawned: opened
beyond all use: unusual

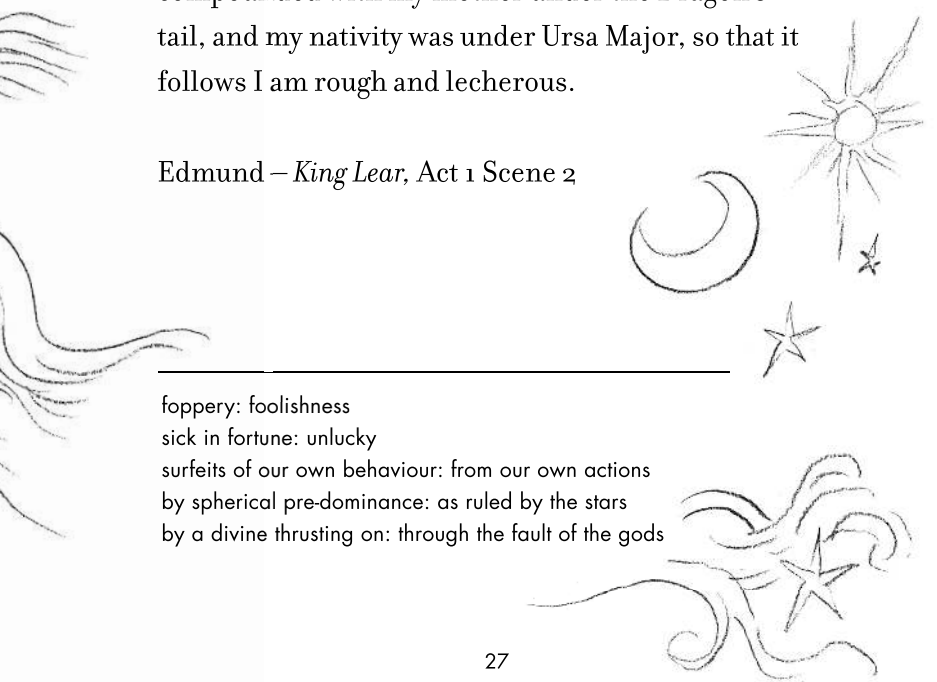


This piece from *King Lear* is the speech of someone who in Shakespeare's time would have sounded very modern. The speaker is a nobleman called Edmund, who is mocking astrology and anything that suggests the way of the world is down to something "divine", meaning supernatural. Shakespeare makes a point that these views come from someone who is "illegitimate". This could mean that you were rejected by the people who were "true heirs" to noble positions.



This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune (often the surfeits of our own behaviour) we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon and stars, as if we were villains on necessity; fools by heavenly compulsion; knaves, thieves and treachers by spherical pre-dominance; drunkards, liars and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on. An admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition on the charge of a star! My father compounded with my mother under the Dragon's tail, and my nativity was under Ursa Major, so that it follows I am rough and lecherous.

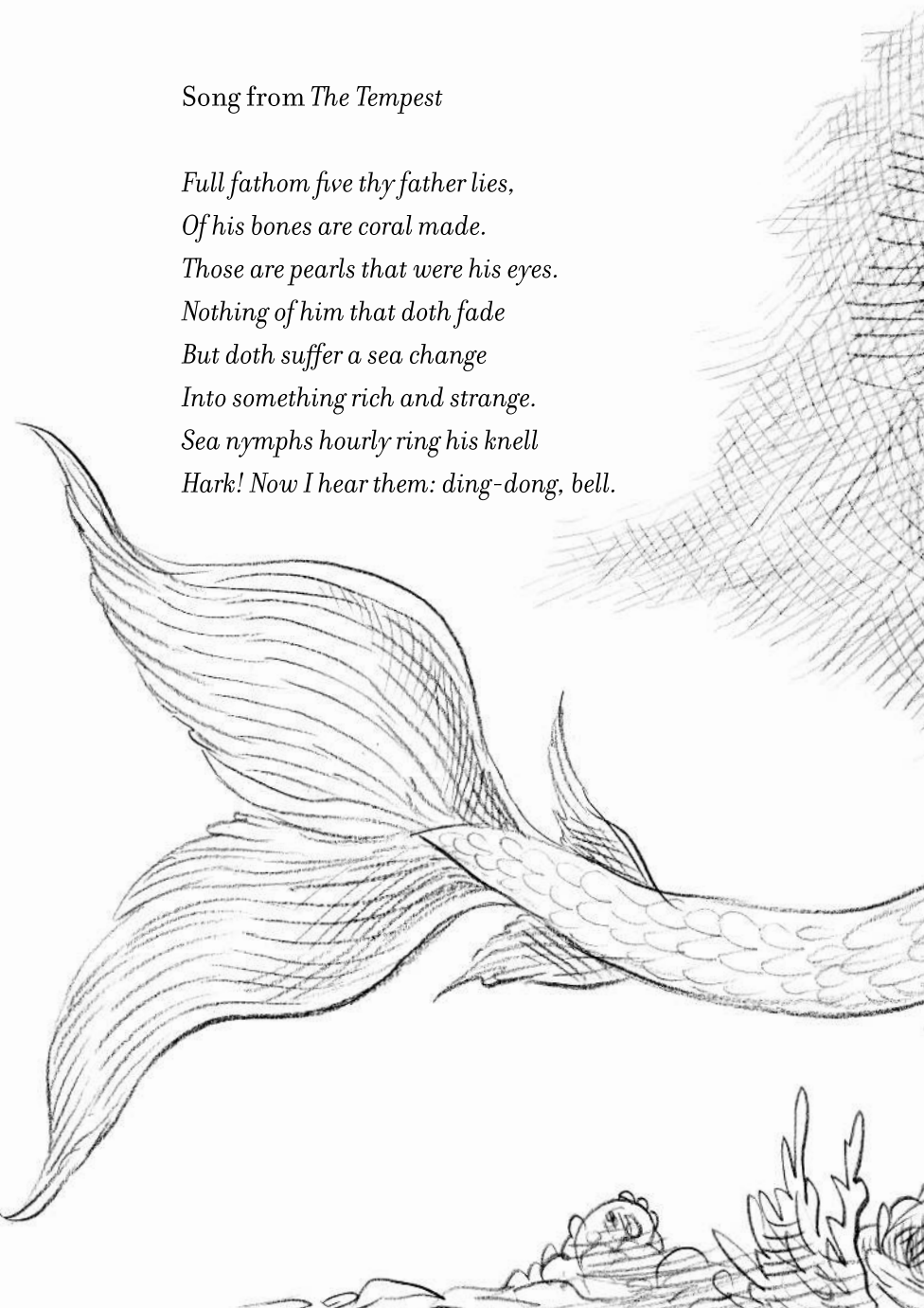
Edmund – *King Lear,* Act 1 Scene 2



foppery: foolishness
sick in fortune: unlucky
surfeits of our own behaviour: from our own actions
by spherical pre-dominance: as ruled by the stars
by a divine thrusting on: through the fault of the gods

Song from *The Tempest*

Full fathom five thy father lies,
Of his bones are coral made.
Those are pearls that were his eyes.
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea change
Into something rich and strange.
Sea nymphs hourly ring his knell
Hark! Now I hear them: ding-dong, bell.



Not fair!

Do you sometimes think life's not fair? Maybe something you're told to do, or what you read in the news? All across Shakespeare's plays, we hear from characters who think that life is not fair. Sometimes it's about things being not fair for them as individuals. Sometimes it's about the state of the world – what we call social criticism. Then again, sometimes it's a mixture of both.

Take the first speech in this section, from *The Tempest*. On the one hand the speaker, Caliban, is complaining about his own situation as a native person on an island. But then, if you think about it, we can also perhaps view this speech as standing for how other native peoples might feel, losing where they live and being enslaved.

Similarly, the famous speech by Shylock from *The Merchant of Venice* is about his situation as a Jewish

person, but it has been taken many times since as a plea for all people, for equality and against prejudice.

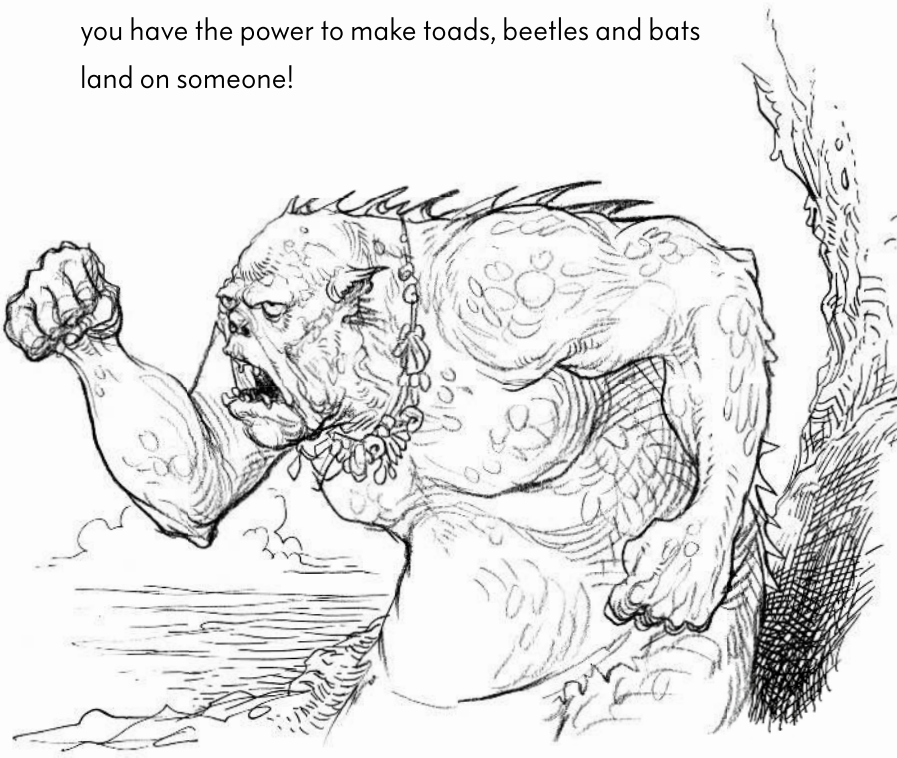
Two big questions people ask about Shakespeare are, "What did he think? What were his opinions?" Some say these are impossible to answer because it's his characters who are speaking, not him. Others say that you can glimpse what he thought because of how characters are treated by the time we get to the end of the plays. Are the bad people punished? Do the good people win out in the end? Sometimes, though, good people end up being the victims, so that leaves us with a puzzle, doesn't it?

This speech comes from *The Tempest*. Caliban is a native of an island and here he is raging against Prospero, the duke who has come to the island and enslaved Caliban.

If you read this out loud, you can try doing it as angrily as possible, especially the part where he says:

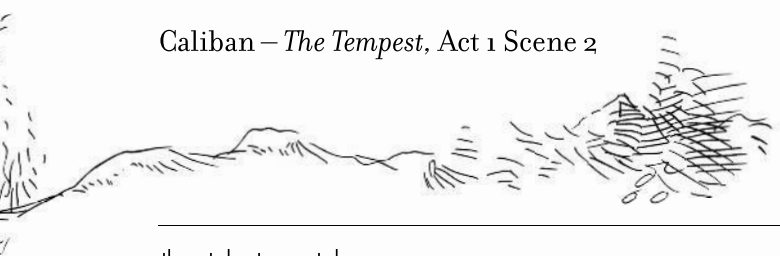
All the charms
Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!

That's a kind of curse ("light on you" means "land on you"). As you say the words, you could imagine that you have the power to make toads, beetles and bats land on someone!



This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,
Which thou takest from me. When thou camest first,
Thou strok'st me and madest much of me, wouldst
give me
Water with berries in 't, and teach me how
To name the bigger light and how the less,
That burn by day and night. And then I loved thee,
And showed thee all the qualities o' the isle,
The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile.
Cursed be I that did so! All the charms
Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!
For I am all the subjects that you have,
Which first was mine own king: and here you sty me
In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me
The rest o' the island.

Caliban – *The Tempest,* Act 1 Scene 2



thou takest: you take
the bigger light: the sun
the less: the moon
light on you: land on you
first: before
sty me: lock me up

This famous speech comes from *The Merchant of Venice*. The character speaking is called Shylock. Most people think the play is antisemitic – that means prejudiced or hateful towards Jewish people. However, in this speech in particular, Shakespeare has written words which allow us to hear Shylock's view of the world.

This may not save the overall play from portraying Shylock in antisemitic ways, but this speech is surely one of the greatest examples in literature of an appeal from someone oppressed by hate and prejudice standing up for himself. The way he does this is by saying that we are all human.

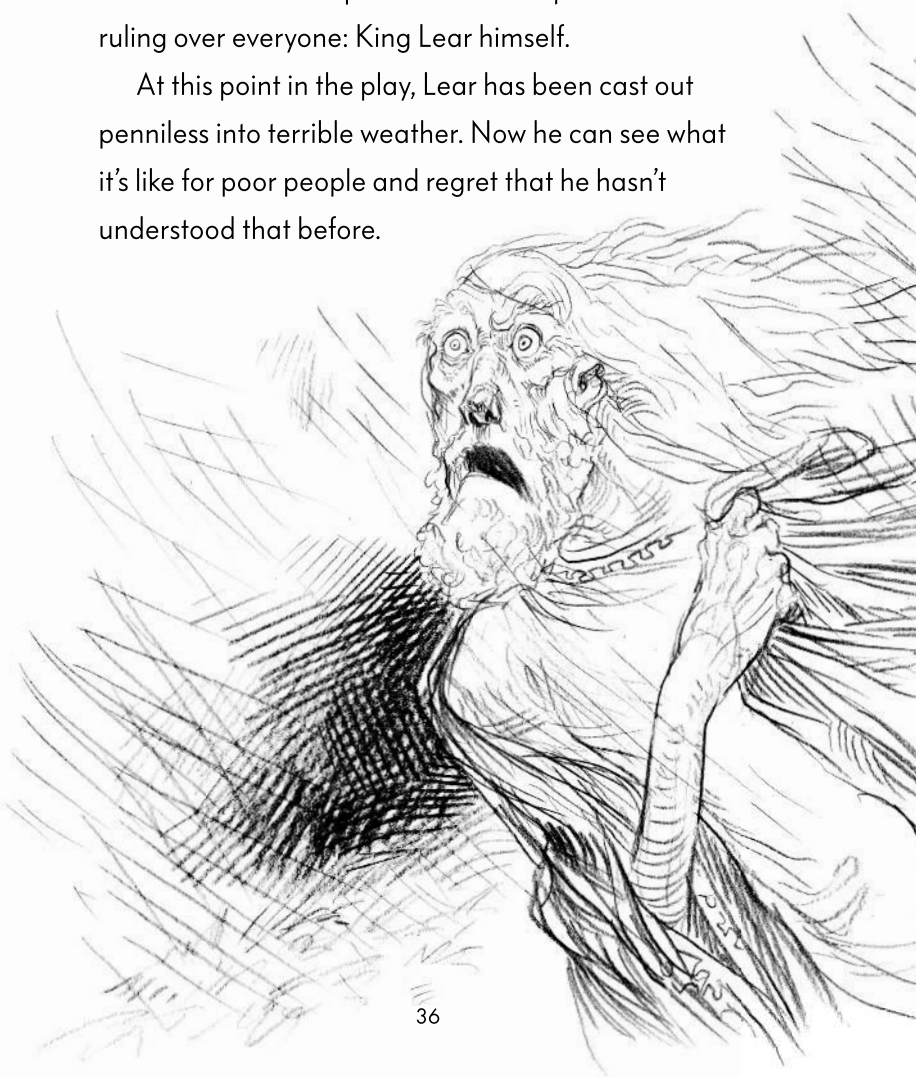
He hath disgraced me and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies – and what's the reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?

Shylock – *The Merchant of Venice,* Act 3 Scene 1

hindered me half a million: blocked me half a million times

King Lear is a tragedy in which cruel and sad things happen. Characters often tell us what they think is wrong with the world, and here we hear from someone who in the past has been responsible for ruling over everyone: King Lear himself.

At this point in the play, Lear has been cast out penniless into terrible weather. Now he can see what it's like for poor people and regret that he hasn't understood that before.



Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your looped and windowed raggedness defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp.
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou may'st shake the superflux to them
And show the heavens more just.

Lear – *King Lear,* Act 3 Scene 4

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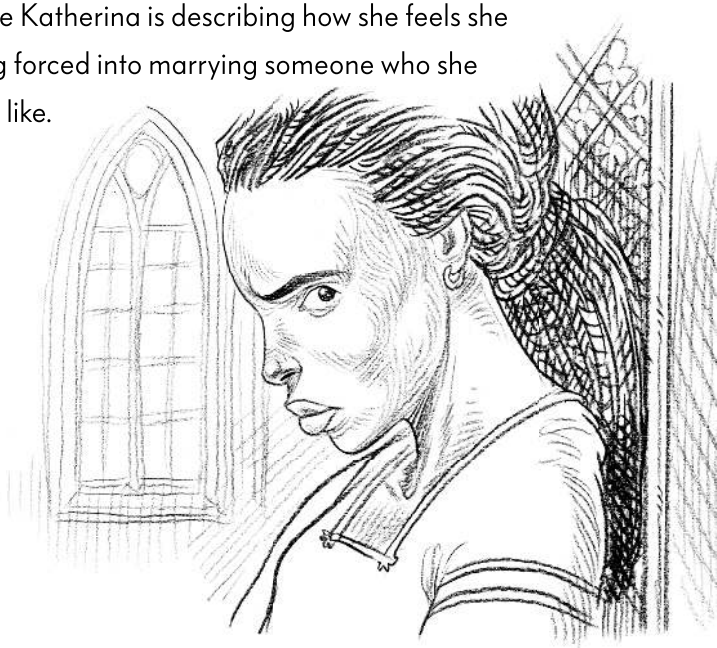
wheresoe'er: wherever
bide: suffer
looped and windowed: torn and tattered
ta'en: taken
Take physic, pomp: rich people, learn from this
shake the superflux to: share what extra you have

***The Taming** of the Shrew* has been argued about for many years. In fact, it's probably the most argued about of all of Shakespeare's plays! That's because it tells the story of a man "taming" a woman – Katherina – who is portrayed as wild and aggressive, what was called a "shrew".

Some people regard this plotline as being very sexist and out of date for modern times. Others see it as a cautionary tale: in other words, the play is saying "don't be like this" or "these people are objectionable".

In the end, we have to make up our own minds about it.

Here Katherina is describing how she feels she is being forced into marrying someone who she doesn't like.