And then we are given the ending:

> About her arm was wound a rosary
> Of coral beads, the larger beads of green,
> And thereon hung a brooch of golden sheen

And on that brooch was the inscription "Amor Vincit Omnia"— "Love conquers all." Not an unusual motto for a nun, but on most nuns you would assume "Love conquers all" refers to God's love. Chaucer, however, has described her so completely as a romantic heroine that we realize the phrase refers to physical love—the last thing that should be on a proper nun's mind.

What is brilliant about this description is not Chaucer's satire against the clergy. What was so challenging for Chaucer was to offer a damning portrait of a nun with every line seeming to be praise of her. It is hard enough to create satire that is obvious; to make it praise that is not praise at all is wonderful.

Those are only two of the thirty descriptions in the "General Prologue"—unique in all literature not only because they give such devastatingly clever insights into the foibles of the folk of Chaucer's day, but also because Chaucer set himself the impossible task of putting it all in the mouth of a narrator who supposedly sees nothing but benign aspects of all the pilgrims. And because Chaucer has such a keen genius for observing human nature, his characters seem as fresh and recognizable to us now as they did to the audiences of his time.

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William Shakespeare

(1564–1616)

When you turn to William Shakespeare you almost have to begin by giving *the* most impressive statistic about this man, which, of course, is this: from the time he died in 1616 right down to our time, he has always been considered the greatest writer in the history of the English language. That fact alone would be impressive, but it becomes even more so when you realize that William Shakespeare is regarded as not only the greatest writer in our language, but as the greatest writer of all time in *any* language.

It is our extreme good fortune that we were born into a culture that speaks and writes the language that was written and spoken by Shakespeare. Of course if you say that to high school students and then give them a text of William Shakespeare's to read, they insist that there must be some mistake. Students see immediately that Shakespeare's language is not, of course, the language they speak every day. And yet given that in English we have had three distinct periods—Old English, Middle English, and Modern English—some may find it surprising that Shakespeare does not belong to the Old English or Middle English period, but actually belongs to our own period—he is the first great writer in the Modern English language. Obviously over four

hundred years our language has changed significantly, but Shakespeare remains a writer in the modern period, the one in which we live.

Shakespeare's contribution to world literature has been in the field of drama. He did write poetry, but the works that secure his immortality are the thirty-seven plays we believe he wrote. Because he wrote plays, he is different from all the other authors we examine in this book (with the exception of Oscar Wilde). Almost all other great writers in the English language became famous either because they wrote poetry or they wrote fiction. Shakespeare stands virtually alone as a genius who wrote plays, and because he wrote plays, we have to treat him a bit differently. With other writers—Frost for example, who wrote poetry, or Dickens, who wrote novels—if you want to know how worthy that author is, you simply take the book, you read the poem or the fiction, and you decide on its merit. But Shakespeare never wanted anyone simply to read his plays. He would think it absolutely ridiculous that today if we want students to understand the greatness of Shakespeare, we assign them one of his plays. All too often students sit in a classroom with the text before them, examining Shakespeare in the form of words (often difficult words) on a page.

I also assume that he would be highly amused at all the doubt as to whether he actually wrote those brilliant plays attributed to him. I know I am. I have never had one person ask, "Do you think Charles Dickens really wrote *Great Expectations* or might it have been William Makepeace Thackeray?" What is it about Shakespeare that has given rise to so much questioning of the authorship of the plays?

It is true that he wrote long ago and therefore many of

the confirming biographical facts have been lost. But think of Chaucer—he wrote two hundred years before Shakespeare and nobody to my knowledge ever questioned the authorship of *The Canterbury Tales.* No, those who are convinced that Shakespeare could not be the writer of those immortal plays tend to have a rather snobbish objection to his authorship.

You will notice that these doubting Thomases always put forward as the real playwright a man of much higher birth than the commoner Shakespeare. Their candidates are generally noblemen who traveled widely, mingled with the best minds of the age, and led exciting lives overflowing with incidents and anecdotes. They point out that the few facts we do have concerning the life of one William Shakespeare are peculiarly dull. He never seemed to go anywhere of interest.

Well, of course Shakespeare's life was dull. He spent it writing, directing, and occasionally performing in thirty-seven brilliant plays. I tend to eliminate all noblemen as possible authors for these plays; they simply were too busy living it up to sit down and do much thinking, let alone all that magnificent writing.

Ah, the Shakespeare doubters continue, but we know that Shakespeare dropped out of school at about age fourteen—and the school he left was in the backwater town of Stratford. How could an eighth-grade dropout of a common country schoolhouse go on to write *any* play, let alone *Hamlet* or *King Lear*?

How indeed? This argument stumped us Shakespeare advocates until scholars recently began investigating the state of education in sixteenth-century England. This was

the Renaissance period of English history, and the stress on education was so remarkable then that a brilliant young student—even in Stratford—could have absorbed enough classical learning by eighth grade that he could have left school with the equivalent knowledge of one of today's Ph.D. candidates in English history plus a master's candidate in Greek and Roman mythology.

Occasionally, I admit, our defenses for Shakespeare's authorship reach the height of divine absurdity. My favorite is the critic who used numerology to prove that Shakespeare was not only capable of writing all the plays but was also an unacknowledged author of the King James translation of the Bible. The Bible was indeed translated in England at the height of Shakespeare's writing power—the year 1611, when he was forty-six. This critic reminds us that Shakespeare loved all sorts of word and number games as demonstrated by the constant game-playing in all the plays. Thus, he is convinced Shakespeare left a clue to his authorship of the Bible translation by placing it in a biblical section corresponding to his current age, forty-six. The only such section would be Psalm 46. The critic read the psalm carefully but found no hidden clue.

But then he was inspired by a new—and even dumber—idea. Counting down exactly forty-six words from the opening of the psalm, he came to the word *shake;* counting up exactly forty-six words from the end, he came to the word *spear.* If this convinces you of Shakespeare's authorship of the King James version of the Bible, you should receive free membership in a new literary touring club—Gullible's Travels.

I mention all this because with so much unknown and

unknowable concerning Shakespeare's personal background, I think we are on safer ground to rebuild the wondrous experience of attending a dramatic performance of his works rather than investigating the man himself.

To fully experience a play is to go to a playhouse today and see the play performed—the curtain goes up and Shakespeare's words wash over you in glorious richness and vitality. He wanted you to experience the words by listening to them, not by reading them. It is this combination of *hearing* and *seeing* a work of art that makes drama so exciting. What I would like to do for you is to take you back about four hundred years to Elizabethan England, London in particular. I want to leave you with an impression of what it was like to attend the Globe playhouse when Shakespeare was its most prominent playwright.

You would have walked into the Globe just as you walk into a movie theater today; the doors were in the back, the stage was up front. Admission for a seat to a Shakespeare play in the 1590s cost exactly four pennies; even back then, though four pennies certainly had more weight than they do today, that was inexpensive for three and a half hours of live entertainment.

You did not give the four pennies to the usher; instead, the usher held out a small, locked metal box, the moneybox. You put your four pennies in that box so the usher couldn't run off with your money. This system had a problem, however: the moneyboxes were tiny, but pennies were enormous, larger than silver dollars are today. After only a few people had put in their four pennies, the little box became so full you couldn't jam in another penny. The usher then had to get someone to watch the back gate so people

wouldn't sneak in. Then he would run as fast as he could backstage, to a little office with a lock on it. He would unlock the office door, throw in the full moneybox, grab an empty box, and run back. But after only a few more people had come in, that empty box would be filled, so he had to run behind the stage all over again.

You may wonder why the theater management simply did not supply a larger metal box to hold all of the pennies. They *had* thought of that, but discarded the idea. Shakespeare's playhouse was south of the river Thames in a highly unsavory neighborhood. The only people who daily frequented that area were prostitutes, robbers, and murderers. Any of these folk, had they seen a huge metal moneybox, would have stolen it without hesitation. The theater managers craftily assumed that no robber in his right mind would risk trying to steal a few pennies in a tiny box. Of course you may have guessed by now what that office backstage where the moneyboxes were locked up was called . . . the box office; that is why, four hundred years later, you still cannot go to a public form of entertainment—a movie, a rock concert, a play—without first visiting the "box office."

Once you paid your four pennies to see a play, you did not immediately take a seat. As you came down the aisles, on either side of you against the walls were large refreshment stands. Shakespeare's age was the first to move the refreshments from outside the playhouse to inside the playhouse. Theater managers cleverly figured out that if you could only buy refreshments once you paid for your ticket and were inside the playhouse, you were trapped. They could charge any exorbitant amount of money they chose on those

refreshments, and you would have to pay it because there was no competition. If you went outside for refreshments, you would have to pay to get another ticket to get back inside. And that is why, four hundred years later, when you go to a movie, you will pay $3.75 for a box of buttered popcorn. That box of buttered popcorn that costs you $3.75 costs the owner of the movie theater 11¢ a box. That 11¢ includes the cost of the popcorn and the employee's salary. This is the highest markup in retail American business, and we never give it a second thought. Theater policy in Shakespeare's age taught us to overcharge the audience on the refreshments to generate profits.

Inside the playhouse, three refreshments were usually for sale. If you wanted dessert, they sold you an orange; oranges were cheap, they were sweet, and when you ate an orange, you really did not make enough noise to distract the actors onstage. If you wanted an entire meal, then they sold you a meat pie. We have no idea what the ingredients were for these pies, but we do know, because of diaries, that you would not encounter a live cat or dog within a five-square-mile area of the theater. One other item was for sale, which sold more than the first two combined. If you did not want an orange nor a meat pie, you could purchase a tomato. Now it seems odd that you could buy a tomato at a Shakespeare play, because in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries when Shakespeare was writing, no one in England ate tomatoes. The English believed the tomato to be deadly poisonous. Yet tomatoes sold like the proverbial hotcakes at Shakespeare's theater. You bought the tomato, you took it to your seat, and you waited. If after the first fifteen minutes of the performance you concluded that this was a waste of time

and the most excruciatingly boring experience you had ever had to endure, you now had a convenient method of letting the actors know that this was not your idea of entertainment. You simply waited for the actor you deemed the worst offender to step to the edge of the stage and deliver his soliloquy. You then picked up your tomato, aimed it, and let it fly. Not surprisingly, this practice distracted many actors. Don't forget, they thought they were poisoned missiles. An actor, if enough tomatoes were being tossed at him, would lose concentration. If you have ever been on a stage and lost your concentration, you know what follows—you forget your lines. In Shakespeare's day, prompters would cue actors who forgot their lines, but a prompter was told not to help an actor who forgot his lines because so many tomatoes were being hurled at him. Therefore there was no helpful cue, the play would stop, and the audience was told to go home.

Unfortunately for Elizabethan playwrights, if a play was stopped because countless tomatoes were being hurled, the audience received a complete refund. In Shakespeare's day, you did not have to pay for a play that was below standard. Obviously, had Shakespeare not been a gifted playwright, he would have starved. Granted, Shakespeare was paid through a complex system of patronage, theater ownership, and author fees, but all of these payments depended on the quality of the plays themselves. As far as we can tell, not one tomato was ever tossed at a Shakespeare production, because William Shakespeare had the ability to keep an audience spellbound from the opening lines until the last word of the last act.

Although Queen Elizabeth I and her courtiers were

treated to command performances of all Shakespeare's plays, he could not afford to write solely for the queen and the court. To earn a living he had to write for the general public, and because the general public was largely uneducated, he had to write at a lesser level. Scholars tell us that 40 percent of the audiences at a Shakespeare play were people who possessed no more than the equivalent of a fifth-grade education today. Yet these folk loved Shakespeare and attended his plays in huge numbers. The poor and uneducated could only save about one penny for entertainment. It cost four pennies to get a seat at a Shakespeare play, so what did these people do if they only had a penny? Shakespeare was a good businessman. Why should he turn away almost half the population of London just because they did not have four pennies for a seat? If all a person had was a penny, he was told to put the penny in the moneybox. The usher, however, did not seat him; instead, he was taken all the way down to the front of the stage to join the rest of the "groundlings," as the standees were called. In Shakespeare's time, the stage was rather low, so if you stood close to the stage, you could still see the play's action. You were in fact so close that you could reach out and touch the actors as they came downstage.

This proximity to the groundlings could prove uncomfortable or even dangerous for the actors. In a diary from that time one actor tells us that if he saw too many groundlings standing up against the stage before the play started, he would not go out to perform because he was afraid he would get hurt. Why? Did he think they were going to throw tomatoes from such a close angle that he would be injured? No; the groundlings could not afford to

buy tomatoes. But when the play would begin, the groundlings, an unsophisticated lot, would become so excited and so caught up in the action that their mouths would hang open; they would be gaping up at the actors, slack-jawed, watching the play unfold. This rapt attention was not what bothered the actors, but when the play became exciting and suspenseful, as in the early fight scenes in *Romeo and Juliet*, the groundlings would start to salivate. That saliva would drip down their chins and eventually fall onto the edge of the stage, where it made this little rivulet at the actors' feet. In his diary the actor wrote, "I feared when it was time for me to give my soliloquy and step to the edge of the stage, I was in grave danger of slipping in the drool left by the groundlings."

This particular performing hazard led to a superstition still firmly held by actors today. In Shakespeare's day actors believed that if someone said "good luck" to them before they went onstage, it was sure to bring bad luck. Rather than "good luck," the well-wisher would say, "Perform so the groundlings become so enthralled that they slobber on the stage; may you slip in it and break your leg." Even today one still says to a performer, "Break a leg." (Of course this is not to be taken literally. Tonya Harding may be the only person who took the expression as advice.)

The groundlings made their influence felt in the shaping of Shakespeare's plays. What is the first thing you see in *Macbeth*?—three hideous witches incanting over a bubbling cauldron. The play does not begin with a discussion of succession to the throne, it begins with what was sure to enthrall the groundlings: a hellish prophecy. When the curtain goes up on *Julius Caesar*, what is the first thing we see?

Not Caesar. We see a conspirator who says, in effect, I cannot wait until we stab Caesar and his blood flows all over the forum. The groundlings relished this especially, because they knew that before every performance of *Julius Caesar* a pig was slaughtered offstage, and its bladder carefully removed, because the bladder had the most concentrated deep red blood. Still warm, the bladder would be tied underneath the toga of the actor playing Julius Caesar. When Brutus stabbed Caesar, he made certain to burst the pig bladder with the stage knife, and all that rich, red pig blood would gush right down the costume onto the stage. And since in Shakespeare's day all stages were tilted downward (that is why we still have the terms *downstage* and *upstage*), all that blood would flow down to the edge of the stage, where it mingled with what had already been left there thanks to the droolers. Diaries of the day tell us that during productions of *Julius Caesar*, the groundlings would take the fingers of their right hand, dip them in the mixture of drool and pig's blood, and wave back at the actors to let them know they were enjoying this production.

Of all of Shakespeare's thirty-seven plays, the one the groundlings turned out in the largest numbers for is still, today, his most popular play: *Romeo and Juliet*. Why would such an uneducated crowd regard *Romeo and Juliet* as Shakespeare's best play? If you think about it, how much intelligence is really needed to become involved in this story? Early in act 1 you see a handsome teenage boy, in tights no less, named Romeo. A few lines later you see coming out from the other side of the stage what appears to be a lovely teenage girl, Juliet. (As you probably know, females were not used onstage in Shakespeare's day.) Someone on

that stage, Romeo or Juliet, is going to strike your fancy, and you're going to pay attention through sex drive alone. Scholars tell us that the opening scene of every one of Shakespeare's plays always promises the audience one of three things: supernatural creatures, violence, or youthful sex. Shakespeare knew that if he did not titillate the groundlings early, he would lose their favor.

One play Shakespeare wrote is so difficult it is almost never taught in high school, only in college: *King Lear.* Yet even *King Lear* was written for the groundlings. To understand *King Lear,* all you need is to see the play with an eight-year-old. When the curtain goes up on act 1, turn to the eight-year-old and say, "Look! There's old King Lear and there are his three beautiful daughters. I hear two of those daughters are rotten beyond belief, but one of them is good and kind and loving." Then ask the eight-year-old, "I wonder, which of those daughters is the good one?" And any eight-year-old will look up at you as if you are an idiot and say, "The youngest daughter is the good one." Sure enough, at the end of act 1 we learn that the two eldest daughters are rotten beyond belief, and the youngest is good.

How would an eight-year-old child know the plot of Shakespeare's most difficult play? Shakespeare knew most of those groundlings sitting up front were illiterate. He also knew his audience had been raised on oral fairy tales and the folk tales of England. So in every major play Shakespeare wrote, he made the central plot a fairy-tale motif. That eight-year-old you took with you to *King Lear* knows fairy tales. He knows that in any fairy tale, if you see three children, you can be certain that the two eldest children will be rotten and the youngest good. It's that way in *Cinderella*, it's that way

in every fairy tale that has three children; the elder two are either wicked or stupid (or both) and the youngest is wise and good. Shakespeare was telling people who couldn't read, this play is going to follow a motif that you know from the good old-fashioned fairy tale.

If this is true, if Shakespeare in his time was so simple and accessible, why do most high school students of today studying Shakespeare need a creative teacher, or Cliff's Notes, to understand his plays? One answer, of course, is the language; after four hundred years it has changed. But language is not the sole reason. The real reason Shakespeare seems so hard today is not Shakespeare's fault, and it's not the students' fault—it is actually my fault. I am an English professor, and it is English professors who are guilty. When Shakespeare was alive, he wrote comedies, tragedies, histories, long poems, short poems, and sonnets. Of those genres, the critics have always cited his tragedies as the most difficult. Yet what do we teach high school students today? As freshmen they read *Romeo and Juliet*—tragedy. As sophomores they read *Julius Caesar*—tragedy. Juniors read American literature, but seniors usually read *Macbeth*, yet another tragedy. Should they go on to college, as freshman they are often taught *Othello*, of course a tragedy. Should they survive to sophomore year, that's when we give them *King Lear.* All we ever seem to shove down students' throats today are Shakespeare's tragedies. They are his most difficult form, so of course they seem difficult to students.

The tragedies are actually difficult for anyone. Let me give you a philosophical key to help you unlock the mystery of almost any tragedy by Shakespeare you read. First of all, how do you know a play is a tragedy? Remember what they

taught you in high school? You know it is a tragedy if at the beginning of the play the character is at a high level of society, but by the end of the play the character has fallen to a low level of society. Look at *Romeo and Juliet.* Where are Romeo and Juliet at the beginning of the play—are they at a high level of society? Yes, they are from two of the noblest families in Italy. Where are they at the end of the play? They are dead. You cannot fall further in society, obviously, than death. In all Shakespeare's tragedies characters begin at a high social level; at the end they are almost always dead. So, is a Shakespearean tragedy any play where at the beginning the character is at a high level of society but takes a long fall during the play?

The answer is, absolutely not; that is not the foolproof answer. If all it took to qualify for tragedy was someone on high taking a long fall, according to that definition our greatest tragic hero would, of course, be none other than Humpty-Dumpty. "Humpty-Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty-Dumpty had a great fall." "Humpty-Dumpty" was not originally a nursery rhyme. Originally "Humpty-Dumpty" was written to teach uneducated people the basic principle of great tragedy. There is more about Shakespearean tragedy in the opening line of "Humpty-Dumpty" than in almost any other source.

"Humpty-Dumpty sat on a wall" does not sound complex, but it is. What does it mean? Suppose you are walking around in your neighborhood some late afternoon. You come to a wall. You look at the wall and there's a little boy sitting on the wall, playing with a yo-yo. Harmless enough. You walk a little longer, you come to another wall, there's a good-looking man and woman sitting on the wall, holding

hands, gazing at the sunset. That doesn't excite you either. You keep walking and come to a third wall, a really high one, and you look up and sitting up there you see Humpty-Dumpty! You take one look at Humpty-Dumpty precariously perched on the wall, and you are immediately concerned. Why? Humpty-Dumpty is an egg.

And this observation leads us to Shakespearean tragedy. Because if you walk by a high wall and you see Humpty-Dumpty the egg up there, you know what you're going to think: "If I were an egg, I might be at the grocery or I might be in an omelette, but I think the last place on earth I would choose to sit would be upon a high wall." Which brings up the question "Well, Humpty-Dumpty, if you are an egg, what are you doing sitting on a high wall at the beginning of your poem?" The answer to that question is an insight into every Shakespearean tragedy. Basically Humpty-Dumpty is saying, "Tragedy, come scramble me. If I didn't want to be scrambled, why, as an egg, would I be on a wall?"

How does this relate to Shakespeare's tragedies? In every one of Shakespeare's tragedies the main character, just like Humpty-Dumpty, puts himself in the worst possible place, and therefore the only way he has to go is down. Look at *Romeo and Juliet* again. Early in the play Romeo learns that he may marry anyone on earth except Juliet; a little later Juliet learns she may marry anyone on earth except Romeo. So what do these two teenagers decide to do? Get married. The marriage is doomed, they know it is doomed, but they marry nevertheless—and pay a mortal price. Look at *Macbeth*. In act 1 of *Macbeth*, Macbeth takes his political counsel from a witch. Should any intelligent person listen to a witch for political advice? Macbeth does and is fated to

fall. All Shakespearean tragedy is united by characters who ignore common sense, who enact something foolish and are bound, then, to fall.

Of everything I have told you about Shakespeare, I believe I have saved the best for last. Every playwright must invent dialogue for his characters. But Shakespeare is the only writer who, when he had to devise words for his characters to say, invented phrases so perfect and clever in their expression that, when the characters delivered them onstage to the other characters, the people in the audience recognized these phrases as works of genius and they stole these gems of speech on the spot. They went home, used them in front of their children. Those children used them—on and on, until right down to our time, out of our mouths will come phrases borrowed from the works of William Shakespeare.

Perhaps you were not aware you borrowed his words because you never knew they were Shakespeare's creations. But you will now, because I can think of no better way to end this look at Shakespeare than by quoting him for you. Every phrase that follows was first invented by the genius of William Shakespeare: If you've ever been *footloose and fancy free*. If you've ever thanked someone from the *bottom of your heart*. If you've ever been *left high and dry*. If you ever took a test that you thought was *a piece of cake*. If you've ever *refused to budge an inch*. If you've ever been *tongue-tied*, *a tower of strength*, *hoodwinked*, or *in a pickle*. If you've ever *knitted your brow*, *made a virtue of necessity*, *insisted on fair play*, *slept not one wink*, *stood on ceremony*, *laughed yourself into stitches*, or had *short shrift*, *cold comfort*, or *too much of a good thing*. If you've ever *cleared out bag and baggage* because

you thought it was *high time* and that is *the long and short of it*. If you've ever believed *the game is up*, even if it involves *your own flesh and blood*. If you ever *lie low*, *till the crack of dawn*, *through thick and thin*, because you suspect *foul play*. If you've ever had your *teeth set on edge*, *with one fell swoop*, *without rhyme or reason*. And finally, if you now *bid me good riddance* and *send me packing*. If you wish I were *as dead as a doornail*. If you think I am *an eyesore*, *a laughingstock*, *a stony-hearted villain*, *bloody-minded*, or *a blithering idiot*, well then, *by Jove*, *O Lord*, *tut tut*, *for goodness' sake*, and (my personal favorite) *what the dickens!* It is *all one to me*, even if *it's Greek to you*, for you are quoting Shakespeare.