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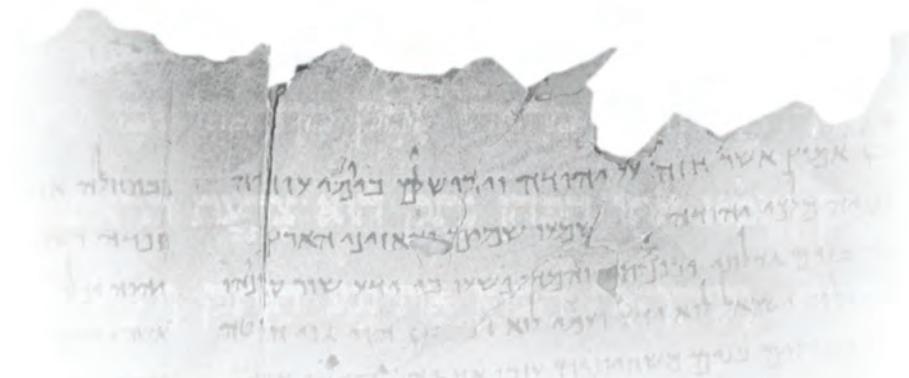
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Chapter One

Much Ado About Nothing?

Staccato cricket chirps laced the brisk night air. Faint twinkles of light dotted the open sky above the outdoor theater where a ram-
pantly staged play was fast lurching to a close. Peter glimpsed the
hands on his watch. *Eleven thirty! This silly production's been going
on for nearly three hours. Didn't the author know that plays should
have an ending — sooner rather than later?*

His mind flipped back to the course of the tumbling dialogue of
the inexplicably merry actors:

Mystery Man A:

Good morrow, Benedick. Why, what's the matter,
That you have such a February face,
So full of frost, of storm, and cloudiness?

Mystery Man B:

I think he thinks upon the savage bull.
Tush, fear not, man; we'll tip thy horns with gold,
And all Europa shall rejoice at thee;
As once Europa did at lusty Jove,
When he would play the noble beast in love.

Mystery Man A:

Bull Jove, sir, had an amiable low;
And some such strange bull leapt your father's cow,

R. EDWIN SHERMAN

And got a calf in that same noble feat
Much like to you, for you have just his bleat.

Peter frowned, shaking his head. *February face? That's me. Frosted. Stormy. Cloudy-headed. Why did we pay \$45 a ticket to see this? A three-hour medley of obscure words? Like birdbolt? And pleacht? And marl? Cozen'd? Misprising? Accordant? Good lord, what a puzzlement!*

Within seconds, the stage lights faded. Dozens around him sprang to their feet in applause. His eyes widened. He blinked further as the throngs continued their enthusiastic ritual of cheering and clapping. He put his arm around Linda, much in hope of drawing upon a sense of their mutual bewilderment.

"What a waste!" he muttered. "I hardly fathomed a thing. It's no wonder they called it *Much Ado About Nothing*. They got that title right!"

Linda nodded. "No kidding," she whispered, her eyes offering an empathetic glance.

"Why have this man's plays been so popular for so long?" he grumbled, totally befuddled.

"That's the great mystery of it, dear," she replied. "After all, they got us to go for it, didn't they?"

Peter sputtered. "Yeah, right. But that only works once. I get the feeling a lot of these people are the kind that keep coming back. That's what really mystifies me. There must be something other people know that I don't."

"Like Old English?" Linda offered, smiling.

Peter shrugged, grinning. "Sure would help. But that's still not enough to explain why this Shakespeare guy is thought to be so great. These plays of his are a fad that should have died out 400 years ago. Why do they linger . . . even thrive?" He opened the door of their Explorer for her to climb in.

As Peter cranked the key and the engine convulsed, she interjected, "Did you notice how crowded the concessions were during intermission?"

"Sure did. I wanted to get some ale and try one of those Old English dishes. You know, what did they call it?"

"Bangers and mash."

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“That’s it! Bangers and mash.”

“Weird thing was, I had never heard of it before, but I wanted it really badly. Right in the middle of this scene. Isn’t that bizarre?”

“That’s funny. I had the same urge. It happened right as Benedick was philosophizing on how silly love is.” Peter smiled with a broad tease gracing his face.

“You would remember that, wouldn’t you?” She heaved a sigh of practiced frustration. “Peter, you’re hopeless.”

“That I am. But as I was saying, I had this strange urge, even though I wasn’t at all thirsty, I had to have an ale. Of all things, ale! You know how I hate beer! Ale’s even more disgusting. What came over me?”

Linda gasped, drawing back from cinching her seat belt.

“You’ve got to be kidding. I got that same craving — at exactly the same time! I detest ale. Something very peculiar must have been going on. Booze vibes, maybe?”

“You know, the other day I read about how film makers will flash pictures of food or drink on the screen for only one or two frames every so often. Just long enough for those pictures to register in our brains — but not long enough for anyone to realize that those pictures were there. And then every one rushes out to buy a pop and a hot dog. What was that called?”

“You mean ‘subliminal messages?’ ” Linda responded quickly, smiling at his acknowledgment of her brilliance.

“Yep. That’s it.”

“You know, I wonder if the reason Shakespeare has been around so long is that he somehow stuck subliminal messages in his plays so that people would buy more food and guzzle more during intermissions?”

“Yeah, right. That’s pretty far out. I think booze vibes sounds more likely.”

“I doubt it. You know, I think I’ll check out the text for hidden messages.”

“And how are you going to do that?” Peter looked characteristically skeptical.

“Well, remember that we both had the same urge for ale and bangers and mash at the same time? I’m going to type in Benedick’s

lines at that point into my computer and search for hidden messages.”

“There must have been something brain warping in that ale. You had it two hours ago. It seems to affect you for a long time. I hope it hasn’t done any permanent damage.”

“For Pete’s sake, Peter! Stop it. You’re insufferable.”

He nodded, admitting his stubbornness as they idled at the stoplight. “All right. I’m a sad case. No doubt about it. But how are you going to search for hidden messages with your computer?”

“Well, I guess I’ll look for words hidden under the surface text. You know. Like suppose ‘ale’ is hidden there, but that it shows up by starting with ‘a’ and skipping five letters to come to an ‘l’ and another five letters to come to an ‘e.’ Maybe our brains can process information like that even when we’re having a devil of a time understanding all that Old English in the plain text.” Linda looked proud of her supposition.

“Devil is right. Sounds like you’ve thought of a way to find anything you start to look for.” Peter’s face curled up after another flash of doubtful insights.

“Perhaps. That’s a good point. Maybe I’ll have to do some math to figure out what the chances are that codes like that could happen by chance.”

Peter tromped on the accelerator, initiating a cadence of rubber squeals on slick asphalt. “Sort of like that old joke about having a monkey dance his fingers on a keyboard long enough and, lo and behold, you’ll wind up with . . . with . . . with another copy of *Much Ado*.”

Linda guffawed. “Maybe you’ve got something there. Shakespeare was probably nothing more than a well-organized monkey.”

“More efficient, though. I’d give him that much.” A measured smugness spread over his cheeks.

“I guess before I horse around with a lot of formulas to figure out the chances, maybe I should first see if there are any hidden codes in Old Will’s words?”

“I would, if I were you. No sense in making ever more ado about nothing than already has been.”

The dimly lit den offered only a spare attraction — a glowing monitor that shimmered eerily. “You won’t believe this, Peter. I’ve

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picked apart those lines where we both got that thirst for ale and that odd hunger for bangers and mash. Guess what I found?”

“More obscure language? Do ‘fribbers’ and ‘gloop’ sound appetizing?” Peter retorted.

“No, my love. I found the subliminal messages for ale and bangers right in Benedick’s words. Come have a look.”

“Give me a break, Linda. Have you been drinking more ale?”

“No. Here. Look at this. I’ve highlighted where ‘ale’ appears as a code.”

I do much wonder thAt one man, seeing how much another man is a fooL when he dedicates his behaviours to lovE, will, after he hath laugh't at such shallow follies in others, become the argument of his own scorn by falling in love: and such a man is Claudio. (II, III, 7-12)

“So?”

“Well, the ‘L’ appears as the 37th letter after the ‘A,’ and the ‘E’ appears as the 37th letter after the ‘L.’¹ These letters are equally spaced.”

“Really spaced? Just like you and I?”

“Peter, stop it. See, you count the spaces.”

He leaned down and began counting off the spaces between the “A” and the “L.” “Should I count the spaces between the words?”

“No. Leave them out.”

“All right. Since you insist. 1, 2, 3, 4, . . . 35, 36, 37. There are 37 spaces, just like you said.”

“Okay. Now count the second set of spaces.”

Peter’s head bobbed minutely with each space he counted. “34, 35, 36, 37, again. I’ll be a monkey’s uncle. Hmmmm. Have you done the math?”

“Not yet, but I think I’d better. Look, I also found ‘bangers’ as a code, and ‘mash’ as a code. All within the first 100 letters of this one sentence of Benedick’s words. That’s got to be pretty improbable.”

“I’m worried about you. How much time did you fritter away in looking for these supposed ‘codes?’ ”

“Supposed? Now I know you’ve already made up your mind.”

“And you haven’t?”