

# Where There's a Will

## Prologue

*Whereof what's past is prologue, what to come  
In yours and my discharge.*

[The Tempest, II,i:253 -Antonio]

In its original Greek, Prologue denotes the 'before word.' You use the 'before word' to establish what the story, following your prologue, is about. That said, here's our 'before word.'

*Where There's a Will* is a series of weekly musings that moves to centerstage all the elements, in the chronicles of Will's life and works, presently waiting in the wings. In doing this, we hope to help you, 'our gentle reader,' grasp the main plot of our endeavour - "Will the real Will Shakespeare please stand up." Each backstory we bring, illustrated with nitty-gritty details of an event, a publication, a performance, a 'did you know?' or an 'oh, no he didn't,' seeks to enlighten you about Will's biography, the times he lived in, his plays, his friends, his family, his deeds, and, of course, his misdeeds. Each chapter we offer serves as a prologue in the Encyclopedia of Our Will. More precisely, each prologue acts as a preface.

A preface - from the Latin 'spoken before' - is a prologue that has strayed into the realm of an essay. And an essay - from the French 'to try' - is an article pertaining to the author's point of view on a said subject. The word essay comes from the inventor of the form, the French writer, and self-imposed hermit, Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, who declared:

*My words are my attempt to put my thoughts into writing.*

This is the perfect logline of our intent with *Where There's a Will*.

To dive right into nitty gritty, the purpose of a preface is to map out how the ensuing story came into being, how it unravels, and how it will resolve itself. Ergo, here we go. Today's preface? Hell, why not - prologues.

Though the concept of the prologue starts with the Greek dramatists, the likes of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, the first true master of the pithy 'here's what it's all about' is a favourite wright of Will's, the Roman comedian Tittus Maccius Plautus.

Akin to the father of Jesus, and the early innovators of the professional English stage, Plautus - whose name means 'flat-ears,' and who wanders the streets of Rome three centuries before the birth of the attributed son of God - starts his life as a carpenter. Flat-ears, as in a dog, or flat-footed, the choice is yours, uses his carpentry skills to become a backstage sceneshifter at the local amphitheater. He then discovers he's also very talented at putting quill to papyrus, and Plautus thrusts himself centerstage by evolving into a comic playwright. In all, Flat-ears churns out one hundred and thirty scripts, including such hits as: *Rudens*, the Rope; *Miles Gloriosus*, embodied by Will in the character of Falstaff; *Epidicus*, Plautus' personal favourite, and *Menaechmi*, Will's source for *Comedy of Errors*. Today, we have access to twenty of Flat-ears' plays. What makes Plautus the master of the before word is he writes his prologues as poems. The opening of *Menaechmi* tells us:

*There was a certain aged man, a merchant of Syracuse to him two sons were born, twins, children so alike that their own foster-mother, who gave the breast, was not able to distinguish them.*

[*Menaechmi*, I,i:1 - Prologue]

Will, himself the father of twins - a boy and a girl - first reads *Menaechmi* as a boy in elementary school. When, years later, he thinks to utilize the 'this is going to be chaos' notion laid out in Flat-ears' prologue, he doubles-down on it.

*That very hour, and in the self-same inn,  
A meaner woman was delivered  
Of such a burden, male twins, both alike.*

[*Comedy of Errors*, I,i:53 - Aegeon]

In *Comedy of Errors* - which means the laughter induced by mistaken identity - Will brilliantly incorporates the second set of twins, the Dromios, into the plot by having them - after they've been bought as babies by Aegeon - work as servants to Flat-ears' first set of twins, the *Menaechmi*, who Will calls the Antipholuses.

As we drift from the before common era of Plautus into the common era of the Middle Ages, and the advent of the religiously-inspired mystery plays, the prologue also drifts, into a homily. A homily functions as 'a chat given to a gathering of people.' Its purpose is to give that gathering of people a cogent explanation to the underlying meaning of a particular passage from scripture. With time, the homily evolves into the sermon, and the mystery play morphs into a gigantic Broadway extravaganza. *The Acts of the Apostles*, written by the French brothers Arnoul and Simon Gréban, has five hundred speaking roles, 6,200 lines of verse, and takes forty days to perform! As these massive mystery cycles mature into more succinct stage plays, so the homily/prologue, like a good wine, ripens along with them.

The first acknowledged English play, *Gorbuduc*, penned in groundbreaking blank verse, by the Lord High Treasurer Thomas Sackville, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Dorset, co-authored by the Puritan lawyer Thomas Norton, and performed at Court, before Queen Elizabeth, on Saturday, January 18, 1561 - how's that for nitty gritty? - comes with a prologue. In this instance, it is performed as a pantomime.

Pantomimed prologues, which are all the rage in the early Renaissance theatre scene, are designed to be a brief allegorical sketch pinpointing the moral of the story.

In *Gorbuduc*, to the music of violins, six 'wild men,' dressed in leaves, enter stage. One of them wears a 'faggot of small sticks' about his neck.' A fellow wild-man tries to break the necklace of sticks and tear it off. He cannot. Then, one by one, each of the wild-men remove one stick at a time. The chain being broken, all the sticks fall to the ground. This achieved, the six wild-men exit, and the violins cease playing. Upon completion of this provocative visual demonstration, the audience is now prepped to understand that a state weaved together in unity is strong, but once divided into its 'sticks' is easily broken. The tale of what ensues when Duke Gorbuduc divides his lands between his two sons, Ferrex and Porrex, can now be unraveled by the ensemble of actors. Sound familiar?

*Know that we have divided in three our kingdom;*

*[King Lear, I,i:36 - King Lear]*

As usual, Will takes the theme one step further, and, instead of sons, he explores what happens if you give your land up to your three daughters.

Interestingly, at this point in his life, Will has two daughters back at home in Stratford. His only son, Hamnet, dies a decade before the writing of *King Lear*.

During the Age of Our Will - the Elizabethan and Jacobean phases of theatrical production - the prologue advances a step further, incorporating style and panache. In an Elizabethan theatre, as the expectant groundlings drink their beer, munch on their hazelnuts, and huddle together in the pit awaiting the start of the performance, from the upper proscenium box on the right side of the stage, the dwelling place of the musicians, come two blasts of a trumpet. Thus alerted, hazelnut-munching is temporarily suspended as the garlic-reeking pit, *en masse*, looks to the stage. They do this because they know that upon the third blast Prologue will enter and cross to center.

With an assured gait, dramatically dressed in black, wearing no make-up, upon reaching said center Prologue turns to his rowdy crowd and removes his hat. He bows thrice, as is the custom in the English court, and, clearing his throat, prepares himself to declare his address, hopefully as Will has requested of him:

*Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature.*

[*Hamlet*, III,ii:16 - *Hamlet*]

Prologue will give one of four types of before word: the *sustatikos*, in which he will commend the abilities of the play and its playwright; the *epitimetikos*, in which he will give thanks to the audience for their good grace; the *dramitikos*, in which he will explain the plot, and the *mixtos*, in which he will do all of the above. Vitally, Prologue, by talking directly to the audience, with no 'fourth wall,' will pull the crowd into the imaginary world about to be created on stage.

Surely the finest example, transferred from thought to paper to stage, is our Will's Prologue - for technical reasons called Chorus - in *Henry V*:

*O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend  
The brightest heaven of invention,  
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act  
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene...*

[*Henry V*, I,i:1 - Chorus]

With stunning imagery and onomatopoeia, Will yanks us, and our fertile imaginations, straight into the action:

*...Think when we talk of horses, that you see them  
Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth;  
For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,  
Carry them here and there; jumping o'er times,  
Turning the accomplishment of many years  
Into an hour-glass: for the which supply,  
Admit me Chorus to this history;  
Who prologue-like your humble patience pray,  
Gently to hear, kindly to judge, our play.*

[Henry V, I,i:26 - Chorus]

Here's the nitty-gritty. He's called Chorus because he will introduce each Act of the play. A Prologue only introduces the beginning. And thus, it begins...

Will's fellow playwright, best friend, fierce rival, and harshest critic, the ever-jealous, lucky he could speak Latin, Ben Jonson, uses Prologue to remind the audience of their place as a character in his play. In an opening written solely for the performance of Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* at court, Ben aims his before word at a single person in the audience, King James.

*Your Majesty is welcome to a Fair;  
Such place, such men, such language and such ware,  
You must expect: with these, the zealous noise  
Of our land's Faction, scandaliz'd at toys,  
As babies, hobbyhorses, puppetplays,  
And such like rage, whereof the petulant ways  
Yourself have known, and have been vexed with long.*

[Bartholomew Fair, I,i:1 - Prologue]

Ben, who, like best buddy Will, is acutely aware of King James' extraordinarily large ego, and wonderful habit of tipping playwrights when they make him look good, has Prologue go on to iterate it is his hope the king will thoroughly enjoy this rowdy rabble he, 'Ben the Maker,' has put together for the anointed-of-God sovereign.

Apart from *Henry V*, Will employs Prologue/Chorus in six other plays in the canon. The first 'this is what it's all about' he creates begins:

*Now is the winter of our discontent  
Made glorious summer by this sun of York;  
And all the clouds that lour'd upon our house  
In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.*

[Richard III, I,i:1 - Richard III]

Yep, that magnificent monologue opening the mega-hit play *Richard III* - published five times in Will's lifetime - can be considered a before word, or, more exactly, a 'spoken before,' as its point of view is entirely Richard's. In the speech, composed in the *dramitikos* style, Richard, with no fourth-wall, starts by informing us of how the story came into being - having won the Battle of Tewkesbury, his brother Edward of York is now firmly on the throne - moves on to explain what is going to unravel - because he is deformed and ugly and cannot be a lover, he will become a villain - and proceeds to tell us how it all will resolve - his brothers coming to blows with one another will leave him to be king. Thus, all the elements required of a prologue are answered.

Will's first 'real' prologue is found in the play noted for its 'popularity amongst the younger sort.' This story turns out to be so popular amongst the English youth, the copy held in the Bodleian library, at Oxford, has to be chained to the shelf to stop the students from nicking it.

Its fourteen-line prologue, in a nod to Plautus and Plutarch, is in the form of a poem:

*Two households, both alike in dignity,  
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,  
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,  
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.*

[Romeo & Juliet, I,i:1 - Chorus]

*Romeo & Juliet* opens with, what is the 'rave' in the London of the 1590's, a sonnet. In truth, R&J's Prologue is a hybrid Chorus; there are two prologues in the play. Act two begins with the seldom performed sonnet:

*Now old desire doth in his death-bed lie,  
And young affection gapes to be his heir;*

*That fair for which love groan'd for and would die,  
With tender Juliet match'd, is now not fair.*

[*Romeo & Juliet*, II,i:1 - Chorus]

It's a verse about the loss of virginity, which will take place very shortly. Will does not have his hybrid Prologue/Chorus appear again, the reason being after Act two he does not want to slow down the action of the fast-moving story. The whole thing from "what lady is that...?" to "there rust and let me die," takes place in six days!

After *Romeo & Juliet* comes a play also about young lovers, but this couple are more far more problematic than the Verona teens:

*In Troy, there lies the scene...  
...The ravish'd Helen, Menelaus' queen,  
With wanton Paris sleeps; and that's the quarrel.*

[*Troilus & Cressida*, I,i:1,9 - Gower]

*Troilus & Cressida*, set amongst the horrors of the decade-long *Trojan War*, is a tough play to understand. The Irish, Jewish critic Frederick S. Boas ranked it - along with *Measure For Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well* - as a 'problem play.' One of the problems with *Troilus & Cressida*, is it a comedy or a tragedy? The debate rages to this day [anon].\*

The romance *Pericles*, like *Troilus & Cressida* an odd duck at the best of times, gets the next before word. Like *Henry V*, it's a Chorus. This time Chorus is a historical person, the famed English poet, and close friend to Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower. Our Will naming Gower as the Chorus is a nod to his use of John's poem *Confessio Amantis* [Lover's Confession] as one of the sources to *Pericles* [anon].

In the play's opening, after introducing himself as having risen from the ashes, John tells us the deep dark secret held within the plot:

*I tell you what mine authors say:  
This king unto him took a fere,  
Who died and left a female heir,  
So buxom, blithe, and full of face,  
As heaven had lent her all his grace;  
With whom the father liking took,  
And her to incest did provoke:*

[*Pericles*, I,i:20 - Gower]

Quite the scandal.

Quick bit of nitty-gritty. A 'fere' is an old English word for wife. Clearly, Will needed a word that rhymed with 'heir.' You also have a choice to make in the last two lines. Is 'took' pronounced as we do, or is it 'toke'? Or is provoke 'provook'?

*Pericles*, almost never produced now, is, like *Richard III*, a huge hit in Will's lifetime being published twice in one year, again two years later, and posthumously three times. The play, however, is not included by Heminge and Condell as one of the thirty-six published in the First Folio [anon].

The only play with more than one character for its intro is the 'Scottish Play' *Macbeth*, dramatically performed by three Witches.

*First Witch:*        *When shall we three meet again  
                         In thunder, lightning, or in rain?*

*Second Witch:*     *When the hurlyburly's done,  
                         When the battle's lost and won.*

*Third Witch:*       *That will be ere the set of sun.*

*First Witch:*       *Where the place?*

*Second Witch:*     *Upon the heath.*

*Third Witch:*       *There to meet with Macbeth.*

[*Macbeth*, I,i:1 - Witches]

Upon inspection, we find that the three are actually one. They are the Moirai, the Greek incarnations of destiny: Clotho, the spinner, Lachesis, the distributor, and Atropos, the inevitable. You'll note First Witch talks of the past, Second Witch of the present, and Third Witch of the future. First Witch may appear to be talking of the future, but she's actually referring to the offstage meeting that's just finished and she wants to know when the next one is going to be. Second Witch points out that the three of them are presently watching a battle rage on. And Third Witch predicts that this 'hurly burly' will be done and they will meet up again before sunset.

Clever lad our Will.



The last of Will's plays to contain a prologue is *Henry VIII*. The general consensus, however, is Will did not write it. John Fletcher, with whom Will co-writes three plays; *Henry VIII*, *Two Noble Kinsmen*, and the 'lost' *Cardenio*, is given credit for these words:

*I come no more to make you laugh: things now,  
That bear a weighty and a serious brow,  
Sad, high, and working, full of state and woe,  
Such noble scenes as draw the eye to flow,  
We now present.*

[*Henry VIII*, I,i:1 - Prologue]

It does feel kind'a un-Will like.

Fletcher starts out as an associate of Ben Jonson in the *Children of the Queen's Revels*, patronized by King James' wife, Queen Anne of Denmark. He then hooks up with a new writing partner, Francis Beaumont, and for the next ten years they turn out a bunch of hits the likes of: *The Woman Hater*, *Cupid's Revenge*, and *A King and No King*. It appears that during this decade, Beaumont and Fletcher become tied at the hip, because not only do they write together, they live together, they share each other's clothes, and as the gossip would have it, "there is but one wench in the house between them." It is only when Beaumont gets married, and soon after has a stroke and dies, that John switches to our Will as his writing partner [anon].

And there you have it, the backstories to our Will's prologues. Now, in one third of Will's plays, at the other end, comes the Epilogue. In our next installment of *Where There's a Will*, we will bring you the nitty-gritty on what goes on at the back end of Will's scripts.

Until then, as Pisanio, the virtuous servant to Posthumous and Innogen, reminds us in *Cymbeline*:

*Fortune brings in some boats that are not steer'd.*

[*Cymbeline*, IV,iii:46 - Pisanio]

May she smile down upon you all as you row forth and prosper.  
Anon, good friends.

*Btw, if you have a particular backstory that you'd like us to create with regards to any aspect of Will's life and works, please do not hesitate to let us know and we will endeavour to fulfill your wish.*

\* N.B. [anon] denotes we have a future *Where There's a Will* chapter dedicated to a more in-depth examination of this topic.