

FIFTEEN ALPHABETIC PLAYLETS

NYR INDICTOR
Chappaqua, New York

ANDROCLES AND THE LION
Dramatis Personae: Androcles, Lion

ANDROCLES: Bold creature! Divine entity!
(Feline groans.)
How? Injured? Jinxed karma!
(Lion moves nearer, offers paw, questing relief.)
Sharp thorn! Valor will extract you! Zeus!

THE FOX & THE GRAPES
Dramatis Personae: Fox, Grapes

(A bough comes down, enticing.)
FOX: Grapes! How interesting!
(Jumps, kicks, leaps. Misses.)
Nuts! Overripe--probably quite radically sour! They're unworth
vigorous work.
(Exits, yapping zestfully.)

THE TORTOISE & THE HARE
Dramatis Personae: Tortoise, Hare

(A big contest deciding everything for good.)
HARE: I'll just keep loafing. My nemesis's outpaced.
(Perfect quiet. Rabbit snores.)
TORTOISE: Unwise vanity! What extravagance yon Z's!

ADAM & EVE (Genesis 3:6)
Dramatis Personae: Adam, Eve, Serpent

ADAM: Behold creation, dearest.
EVE: Forget God. Hungry?
(In Jehovah's kitchen.)
Like my new organic pome? Quite ravishing.
SERPENT: Twosome undressed: very wicked.
(Exeunt, yearning zippers.)

IN THE LION'S DEN (Daniel 6:16-20)

Dramatis Personae: Daniel, Lion

(A big cave.)

DANIEL (Entering): Faith governs hunger in Jehovah's kingdom!

(Lion's mouth never opens.)

Persians, quit resisting! See truth undeniably, vividly, wrought!

Exhort your zeal!

DAVID & GOLIATH (I Samuel 17:1-54)

Dramatis Personae: David (little guy), Goliath (big guy)

(A battlefield. Confidently, David enters, fuming.)

GOLIATH: Hah! Ill-fated Jewish knave!

LITTLE MAN: Nay, oh Philistine! (Quietly readies sling.)

Thy unholy vanity will extinguish you. Zing!

NOAH (Genesis 7:5-9)

Dramatis Personae: Noah, Shem, Ham, Japheth, Various Animals

(Ark. Black clouds. Droplets. Enter fauna, gender-paired.)

HAM: In, Japheth! Keep--

(Lightning.)

moving!

NOAH: On, primates! Quick, rodents! Shem--

(Thunder.)

umbrellas! Vertebrates, wiggle. Exert yourself, zebras!

ALADDIN & THE LAMP

Dramatis Personae: Aladdin, Genie

ALADDIN (Bellowing): Come, djinn!

(Enter ferocious Genie.)

Hail, intelligent, just, kind lamp-dweller! Move now! Open--

(Pause. Quiet rustling.)

Sesame!

(Thunder.)

Up. vast wish-fulfiller! Exercise your zeal!

CINDERELLA

Dramatis Personae: Cinderella, Fairy Godmother, Rats

(A ball.)

CINDERELLA: Drat everything!

FAIRY GODMOTHER: Hold it! Just keep looking. Magicians need only patience. Quiet! Rats should transform: ugly valets, walk! Exile your zoomorphism!

HANSEL & GRETEL

Dramatis Personae: Hansel, Gretel (his sister), Witch

(A baked cookie domicile, empty forest glade.)

HANSEL: I'll just knock lightly.

(Miss Nasty opens portal, quaking ragefully.)

SISTER (trembling): Ugly, vile witch! Exorcise your zoophagy!

APOLLO THIRTEEN

Dramatis Personae: Houston, Men on Rocket

(Apollo blast-off. Canaveral delighted. Everyone feels good.)

HOUSTON: Interesting jettison, kids! (Lighthearted.)

MEN: Need oxygen! Problems! Quick! Repeat... (static)

Turn up volume!

(Weary XIII-ers yearn Z's.)

THE GODFATHER

Dramatis Personae: Vito Corleone, Alfredo (his son), Michael (his son), Salozzo (Vito's enemy)

(A backstreet. Corleone downed. Embarrassed, Fredo hides, immobilized, jejune, kneeling, lamenting.)

MICHAEL: Now our papa quests revenge! Salozzo, time's up! Vito's wunderkind'll 'X' you! Zap!

ANTHONY & CLEOPATRA

Dramatis Personae: Cleopatra, Julius Caesar, Marc Antony

(Asp bites. Cleopatra dies. Egyptian faints, grazing hieroglyphic inscription. Julius kneels low.)

MARC: No, O perfect Queen!

(Reviling snake.)

Thou unkindest vermin! Willst extinguish youth? Zounds!

HAMLET

Dramatis Personae: Hamlet, Ophelia

(A bare cliff. Dane eyes father's ghost.)

HAMLET: I, jealous King Laertes' morose nephew--

(Ophelia passes, quietly ranting.)

shall tempt uncle's vice with exposé! Yorick--zounds!

ROMEO & JULIET

Dramatis Personae: Romeo Montague, Juliet Capulet

(A balcony, Capulet domicile. Enter forlorn girl, horny Italian.)

JULIET: Kind lad, may not our passions quicken?

ROMEO (Sweating): Then unlock verandah window.

(Exeunt, yanking zippers.)

SCRABBLE: MAN VERSUS COMPUTER

The May 24 1998 New York Times Magazine reported a Scrabble contest between Maven, a computer program developed by Brian Sheppard (currently on a CD-ROM from Hasbro), and Scrabble experts Joel Sherman and Matt Graham, who finished 1-2 in the World Scrabble Championship in Washington last fall.

Maven was the victor, 6 games to 3, but even Sheppard conceded that the computer had better tiles to play. Maven's certain knowledge of allowable words and its letter-crunching prowess enables it to evaluate all the alternative moves available at each turn. However, Maven's great weakness is its inability to look ahead, resulting in unreasonably "volatile" plays which Sherman and Graham capitalized on. (An example: in one game, Maven placed UGER after H, opening up an outside column which Sherman and Graham bingoed with AVOIDER, worth 99 points.) Look-ahead is more difficult to program in Scrabble than in chess, since the computer, not knowing the contents of its opponent's rack, must act on incomplete information. Sheppard promises that a later version of Maven will have this capability.

The importance of look-ahead was strikingly illustrated in one game. Sherman and Graham, holding a rack of DIMTUU and a blank, could have bingoed with TRIDUUMS, but this would have forced them to draw the last six tiles in the pool. They judged this too risky because of the possibility that Maven would bingo and penalize them for the values of these tiles. Instead, they elected to play a shorter word, MU, ensuring that Maven would have tiles to draw, prolonging the game. Sure enough, Maven bingoed with ORNITHES, but on the next turn Sherman and Graham ended the game with their own bingo, SITUATED. And what would have Maven done in their shoes? TRIDUUMS, for its high score!