

THE ALCHEMIST'S TRAGEDY

A PLAY

BY

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ScriptWright's

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## ACT ONE

## SCENE 1 - THE GLOBE PLAYHOUSE, LONDON, DECEMBER 31, 1607

Actors, mostly King's Men Company sharers rehearsing. It's been a long, hard day and they are freezing their asses off.

Among them are **John HEMINGES**, 51, **William SLY**, 35, **Nicholas TOOLEY**, 26, **Joseph TAYLOR**, 21, (previously a child actor), **Henry Condell**, 31, and **John RICE**, 14, and **Alexander COOKE**, 15. Watching from the side is **John FLETCHER**, 29.

**William (WILL) Shakespeare**, 43, enters with a roll of paper in one hand, a quill and an inkpot in the other; he is re-writing a script.

Will smiles perfunctorily to excuse his tardiness and gestures for the actors to "assemble" a podium down left from chairs and a writing desk. Will works at the podium. The actors go on rehearsing, behind him.

**WILL**

(to the audience, checking his script)

You think I'm speaking to you now directly,  
Words glibly fit to the occasion. Mouth-  
Formed thoughts the mind devises as I stand  
before you? No.

**Richard (Dick) BURBAGE**, 40, enters, talking to the company about their problems with the scene. He sees Will and moves to him. Will looks up.

**WILL**

This hawk's quill speaks my mind,  
By scratching out its pleasures,...

**BURBAGE**

Will's here.

**WILL**

... pains and plots  
In inky squiggles.

**BURBAGE**

Will!

(grabs Will's top page)

"You think I'm speaking to you now directly,  
Words glibly fit to the occasion."  
(out of patience) O what is this?

Will grabs the page and goes back to writing.

**BURBAGE (CONT'D)**

New scenes?

**HEMINGES**

Dick?

Heminges drags Burbage's to give the actors advices.

**WILL**

Can this be me? Tis not? No, tis not.  
These words disgorged or dribbled o'er these lips...  
When e'er I voice my over-heated head...

Pushing through the actors, **EDMUND Shakespeare**, 27, enters, going to Will.

**EDMUND**

Will?

**WILL**

Which holds a thousand Hotspurs to my heart...

**EDMUND**

A word?

**WILL**

It often, usually, always leads to woe.

**EDMUND**

Please.

Edmund grabs Will's pen. Burbage shakes his head and storms out. Will turns to Edmund tossing him a coin.

**EDMUND**

A mean reminder of the ten Pounds. Put down your pen for once; I need to talk.

**WILL**

(patiently sympathetic)  
Ten? I'd forgot. (back to work) Go now.

**WILL**

(firmly)  
I don't!

**EDMUND**

I do. About your sonnets.

**HEMINGES**

Ned, We're trying to make comedy here.

**WILL**

Sonnets?! (*pats Ned's cheek; sotto voce*) I love you brotherly. But please, not now, nor here.

**EDMUND**

It will be now or never.

**WILL**

Only the grave demands us never.

**EDMUND**

Except for a countryside poet writing gospels as if he were god. Come, or regret...

**SLY**

Damn, Ned, will ye let' us work?

**WILL**

Go off, Sly!

Will looks at Edmund, as if deciding to join him. Edmund's hopes rise. But Will grabs and kisses Edmund on the lips with the abandon of a drowning man.

**EDMUND**

What's this, the kiss of death?

**WILL**

A seal of brotherhood. Now (as if "Save yourself!") Run!

**EDMUND**

I'm going, but you will....  
No.

**WILL**

Home to mother.

Will tosses a heavy purse at Edmund.

**WILL**

Here. Take all and make your way.

Edmund starts to throw back the purse but  
can't as Heminges and Sly move him off.

**EDMUND**

(exiting; a cri de coeur)

Why does a brother's dodge-gift feel so like a dragon's curse?

Edmund's gone. Heminges brings Burbage in as  
Sly turns to Will, but dare not interrupt yet.

**WILL**

(turns and writes, saying his words to the audience)

My pen, this feath'ry prick, is my true tongue.  
And only when I've found the ripe expression  
Of my mind, changed, fixed and blotted, can  
I be... content(?) Nay, no more, I am  
Too bitter in these errant muses mouths;  
My pen says I am dead to all I...

Frustrated, Burbage moves to Will, and the  
actors gather round to watch what happens.

**BURBAGE**

Will!

**WILL**

It is the words. It is the words that mold my world.  
The ceaseless questioning syllables that when  
Intoned in action, seek a gossamer truth  
Unknowable but in its breathless pulse.

**SLY**

(mockingly)

"How long will it be ere ye make us right with words?"

**WILL**

(exploding)

What?!

**TITANIA, 40**, storms through pulling hats or  
jackets off and tossing costume pieces at the  
actors.

**CONDELL**

We need you on the script.

**WILL**

Which script?

**SLY**

The one we're working-up,

**BURBAGE**

Where is it?

you think?

**TITANIA**

What the name, ye stoat!?

**BURBAGE**

How the fuck should I know the name of the damn thing?

**HEMINGES**

Dick!

**BURBAGE**

John, stay out of this.

**SLY**

(reading off the prompt script)

"The Life and Lamentable Death of The Noble Timon of Athens."

**WILL**

(barking, grabs the script)  
Where'd you get that? And  
How? It's not finished.

**CONDELL**

From Ralph, off your desk.  
It's three weeks late.

**BURBAGE**

And this is it, Will? This?

**TITANIA**

Why so rude? He writes

**WILL**

You rage as if a play is  
writ by merely pouring ink  
upon a page.

and you complain. He re-writes,  
more complaints.  
Go to!

All are abashed, till Burbage softly speaks.

**BURBAGE**

Still, Will, three months?

**CONDELL**

It would help if we knew  
where this one wants to go.

**TITANIA**

He just said three weeks.

**SLY**

Nowhere.

The Actors grumblingly agree. Titania starts  
to growl at them, till Burbage glowers at her.  
Will grabs the promptbook, and shreds it.

**WILL**

Quite wrong, Master Sly. It wants to go into the funeral pyre of  
ill-conceived labors.

Unseen, Fletcher surreptitiously picks up and  
pockets some of the pages.

**BURBAGE**

The Master of the Revels found the King exhausted by the play we  
gave last week.

**FLETCHER**

My play? Did he?

**SLY**

He slept through half your play.

**BURBAGE**

... and commands another comedy before Twelfth Night.

**TITANIA**

The king was drunk. I saw him through...

**WILL**

She's right. The man's a drunk. Play Twelfth Night twice, he'll never notice.

Will tries to write.

**HEMINGES**

Not the play, the date. After the Epiphany, before the revels end.

**TITANIA**

Epiphany for our new king is more an orgy than a revel, so says I.

**BURBAGE**

Silence, woman!

**CONDELL**

A sot he may be, but this king's our sole support now that Will's rich earl's bedeviled with America.

**TAYLOR**

And the plague rampant.

**HEMINGES**

And winter hard upon us.

**BURBAGE**

So we needs must have a comedy.

**FLETCHER**

King Jemmie's finally tired of Middleton's Londontown nonsense.

**HEMINGES**

He wants true English wit.

**FLETCHER**

Aye, to brag to his ambassadors that Will stole all the wittiest quips from him.

**BURBAGE**

You are his favored poet...

**CONDELL**

His secret half.

**BURBAGE**

It's got to be from you.

**SLY**

Will, some of us need the money.

Cooke bends to pick up a scrap, just as  
Fletcher reaches for it. Cooke threateningly  
grabs it.

**WILL**

And so you rape my half-stewed play and make it what?

**FLETCHER**

Timon's not a comedy.

**WILL**

Just so. Of course it's not.

**FLETCHER****CONDELL**

I told them your intent,  
but when do players hear  
their poets?

We thank you, Master Fletcher.

**BURBAGE**

What you told anyone, pup, is not at issue here.

Will goes back to writing.

**SLY**

We lost a week's takings  
on that silly play of yours.

**FLETCHER**

Twas Will's idea to  
add the scene where all....

**TOOLEY**

Not to mention the cost of  
all those costumes and...

**BURBAGE**

Why is he taking up our time?  
Why are you here?

Heminges takes a script from Fletcher and  
hands it to Burbage.

Fletcher moves to exit, but stops.

**CONDELL**

(trying to quiet the men)

Wait. Wait. Will, how do you see this Timon of Athens?

**WILL**

I don't.

**FLETCHER**

As tragedy.

**SLY**

That doesn't work.

**CONDELL**

I read it as a comedy.

**WILL**

Why?

**SLY**

Because our king wants a comedy.

**BURBAGE**

Oh, god's wounds!

**CONDELL**

What can we do with bitter Grecian rants but play for laughs?

**TITANIA**

It's comedy, if that's the way it ends, aye, Master Will?

**BURBAGE**

The damn thing has no end as yet!

Titania, finished, walks off saying:

**TITANIA**

That's as... (smugly) That's as I see it.

**BURBAGE**

Oh, Tits, be still.

**TITANIA (O.S.)**

Don't call me Tits.

The company is at an impasse.

**WILL**

In truth, I don't know what to do with it.

**BURBAGE**

A poet lost for words!

**SLY**

Now that would be a farce.

**BURBAGE**

You watch. (to the men) The banquet, as John set it. (to stop Will's objection) Watch! Rice, you take Third Lord.

**CONDELL**

And Rice, try to remember you're playing a man this time.

**COOKE**

Him?

**RICE**

What does that mean?

**COOKE**

He's never played nothing but maids and damsels.

**RICE**

How do I act a man?

**BURBAGE**

Think with your prick!

**SLY**

Instead of playing with it.

The Company runs through a scene, beginning with Sly, Taylor playing their roles as fops.

Condell plays TIMON with others as attendants. Timon is a flopish gay man leaning on a catamite who he plays to as he fondles him. He's also unaccountably naive, a rich young man with no sense of reality.

**CONDELL/TIMON**

With all my heart, gentlemen both! And how fare you?

**HEMINGES/FIRST LORD**

Ever at the best.

**SLY/SECOND LORD**

The swallow follows not  
summer more willing than  
we your lordship.

**CONDELL/TIMON**

Gentlemen, our  
dinner's here.

**HEMINGES/FIRST LORD**

I hope it remains not unkindly with your lordship that I return'd you an empty messenger. I had no means to make the loan you sought.

**SLY/SECOND LORD**

My noble lord- Most  
honourable lord, I am  
sick of shame. When your  
lordship this other day  
sent to me, I was so  
unfortunately beggaredly  
short of ready funds.  
If you had sent but two  
together.

**CONDELL/TIMON**

O sir, let it not trouble  
e'en you. Ah, my good friend,  
what cheer?

Think not on't, sir  
Let it not cumber your  
better remembrance.  
Come, bring in all  
ours before...

Titania drags in a casket. Out of it she hands each a giant plate of fake outrageously shaped delicacies: a pig's ass with lumpy brown gravy cascading out of it; a giant bread penis, huge oval-shaped loaves for testicles.

**HEMINGES/FIRST LORD**

Royal cheer, I warrant you.

**SLY/SECOND LORD**

All cover'd dishes!

**CONDELL/TIMON**

(uncovering the dishes)

My worthy friends, draw near.

Stuffing their faces and each other's. It becomes a food fight.

**COOKE/THIRD LORD**

Here's a noble feast toward.

**CONDELL/TIMON**

Each man to his stool with that spur as he would to the lip of his mistress;

It's outrageous. Even Will has to laugh. He grabs the huge punch bowl.

**WILL**

One silly scene makes not a comedy. Enough! Enough!! There's tragedy to come, without clever alchemy.

Will dumps the bowl over Rice's head. It's full of confetti. A free for all erupts. Will turns to the audience...

**WILL**

These sweating, belching, farting fools and bold,  
Contentious fellows, these muses breathing fire  
Have drawn out from my wanton 'magination  
All the worded creatures of my mind.  
Three decades gone I am their helpless scribe,  
Captive to their silly labors, still bemused,  
Beguiled, yet gall'd that they have need and cause  
To mock my intent to make their charming magick.  
But is it their ephemeral artistry  
That wins the penny groundling to my verse?  
I need a dark, still den of tongue-tied time  
To parse it out but have not grit or pluck  
To lock me in the dank cell of my soul.

Down Left, lights up on...

## SCENE 2 - THE BOOKSELLER'S YARD AT ST. PAUL'S CATHEDRAL

**Thomas THORPE**, mid-40's, clutching a ribbon-tied bundle of papers, is dragged on by what appears to be some rich merchant's **STEWARD**, a thug.

**THORPE**

No, no, no! I gave your master five pounds.

**STEWARD**

Aye, and he will have the other ten you promised, now.

**THORPE**

Not till they get here and approve.

**STEWARD**

There's other publishers, y'know. (a beat) Give me back the poems.

**THORPE**

Be not impatient, you have my five, and when I have the surety that these are truly William Shakespeare's, you'll...

**STEWARD**

You have my master's word and he's a...

**THORPE**

They're here.

Edmund runs in, his personality now suave and authoritative.

**STEWARD**

Who're you?

**EDMUND**

Edmund Shakespeare.  
Who asks?

**THORPE**

The poet's brother.  
Where is Will?

**STEWARD**

That's of no matter.

Thorpe hands Edmund the bundle of manuscript.

**THORPE**

Ned. (aside) You promised you'd bring Will.

**EDMUND**

The fee?

Thorpe hands coins to Ned who pockets them, then reads.

**STEWARD**

How do I know he's the poet's brother?

**EDMUND**

You don't need to know. Only he does.

**STEWARD**

Six shillings?!

**EDMUND**

How came you by my brother's sonnets?

**THORPE**

They then are truly Will's?

**STEWARD**

They are my master's.  
That is all you need to know.

**THORPE**

His master is nobility,  
whose honesty is beyond  
question.

**EDMUND**

To him perhaps, but not to me or Will. (to the Steward) Sir...?

Thorpe reaches for the manuscript, but Edmund won't let go of it.

**STEWARD**

He's given surety. Ten pounds.

**THORPE**

Ned, you've been paid. (gestures for Edmund to go) Now...

**STEWARD**

Now! (reaching for the pages) Ten pounds or give them back.

**EDMUND**

Ten pounds, you paid for these?

**THORPE**

Fifteen, with the advance.

**EDMUND**

To him?

**THORPE**

And six shilling.

**EDMUND**

For my brother's sonnets?

**STEWARD**

My master's poems.

**THORPE**

And five pence for the license.

**EDMUND**

Your master's a thief.

**STEWARD**

Who says that, is a dead man.

The Steward pulls out a dagger and moves to cut Edmund who pulls his dagger.

**EDMUND**

These sonnets are private.  
How came he by them?

**STEWARD**

They are my master's.  
Y'need to know no more.

The Steward lunges. Edmund drops back, thrusts then runs off. The Steward runs after him. The printer, follows.

**THORPE**

Hey! My five pounds and six shillings! And five p...

THORPE runs after them. Lights come up in...

### SCENE 3 - THE GLOBE PLAYHOUSE, LONDON, DECEMBER 31, 1607

Everyone's cleaning up the stage. Burbage and Will work to one side, half-heartedly.

**WILL**

You should have better sense of me, Dick Burbage.

**BURBAGE**

I've had a sense of you for much too long.

**WILL**

Lately now, my words are...

**BURBAGE**

Rank and mad, Will, aye. 'Struth, this Timon fellow...

**WILL**

I am so sick of shaving th' face of truth and powdering the pimples of history to help an ill-made king believe he's half divine.

**BURBAGE**

And make the poor sod love you for it. Yet you do it! How are you possible?

**WILL**

I have a sadder strain of truth I need to tell.

**BURBAGE**

Not to the king. Not out our mouths.

Condell approaches with a pitcher of ale.

**WILL**

These royal cens'rings tame my thoughts. The madness stutters me.

**BURBAGE**

You've never dared to put this rash, rude strain in any play 'til now. Why now? Why Timon?

**CONDELL**

What is this madness?

**WILL**

Aging threads.

**BURBAGE**

Of a well-woven comedy, I prithee, please.

Burbage re-joins the others. To eavesdrop,  
Fletcher moves close to clear the water bowl.

**WILL**

Nay, of a poorly knitted life unraveling. This is the day I've feared, irate and senseless.

**CONDELL**

Not bloody likely.

CONDELL holds the bowl for Will to wash in.

**WILL**

I've writ but orphaned couplets, now a year, since Edmund's death.  
(mesmerized by the reflection of his face in the water)  
My words are riot-running children locked  
In an addled brain, begot of nothing but  
Tired vanity. A mind-storm's blown me from  
Myself, into a madman's farcick tragedy.

**CONDELL**

(softly to Fletcher, somewhat concerned about Will)  
Now he's mis-quoting from himself.

**WILL**

(softer)  
Infection leaches from my pen, love's long  
Drained out, all faith in man sinks shame-faced in  
The ditch of time. A much feared fool am I  
who cannot stop this wild distempered, rash  
Imagination.

**CONDELL**

Nay, nay, not so. Not six months since.

Will washes his face and hands.

**CONDELL (CONT'D)**

Recall the Mermaid Tavern, sitting with us all assembled, listening to the lawyer Krick and's client...

**FLETCHER**

Him the thief.

**CONDELL**

While both berate the victim of the theft. None noticing but I, you jotted copious notes twixt hoots and laughs. Once drunk and argued out by cagey Krick, the case then settled, so they shook it off and left. Two minutes on of furious scribblings, you'd penned and in a nonce we played that fresh new scene - for Merry Wives of Falstaff, Bart, Simple, all in words o'the lawyer's case whilst he was pouring the victim in his cups.

**FLETCHER**

Words come as fast as ink can flow when action finds a corner in the heart. Flesh out the Prospero wizard play you dreamed.

The Players gather to take their leave.

**CONDELL**

That of the wizard? Aye. Spew all your villainy through cannibals and spirits, yea, but mark me, Will, no more of scoundrel kings.

**HEMINGES**

So, to the Mermaid, eh? To drown your trouble, Will, straight way.

Condell hands the bowl to Will. The actors turn to go.

**SLY**

And since our wasted effort's put to Will's account, I say he sees us to a meal. Beef and brandy, all, eh? Even Tits.

The actors bump into a frantic **WANDMAN** of St. Paul's Cathedral runs in. He struggles to get past them. Just as he does, Will throws the whole bowl of water at his face, splashing the Wandsman who shrieks!

**WILL**

What now, divine?

The Wandman's startled to see everyone turn to stare at him. He smiles. Sly threateningly walks directly up to him and backs him into the wings.

**WANDMAN**

I seek the worthy Master William Shagpere?

**WILL**

My worth's as thin of substance as the air,  
And more inconstant than a howling wind.  
And I am...

**BURBAGE**

Will?

**WANDMAN**

I've come to find your Will.

**SLY**

Looking for a Willie, are you?

**HEMINGES**

(untying Rice's codpiece)

Here's a nice young hard one you can suck on. Want to see it?

**WANDMAN**

**BURBAGE**

If thou art Will Shagspere  
with a brother actor,  
Edmund? You must come quick.

More trouble with  
your Ned again?

**WILL**

I must?

**BURBGE**

Where to?

**WANDMAN**

St. Paul's cathedral.

**CONDELL**

Our Will?

**SLY**

To a cathedral?

**TOOLEY**

Not he!

Not to be thwarted, the Wandman runs to Will  
and slams a bloody piece of paper on the desk.

**WANDMAN**

(quietly, urgently)

You must, Sirrah!

Titania enters, surprised by the momentary  
silence. She sees everyone looking at Will.  
Will picks up the bloody page. Titania gasps  
at the dripping blood.

**WANDMAN (CONT'D)**

What beckons may, I fear, be Death!

Will cleans the blood off the page and reads.  
The Wandman whispers in his ear, then runs  
out. Will drops the bloody page.

**CONDELL**

Will?

Condell catches the page. Will hastily stuffs  
his writings in his doublet, grabs a hat and  
cape from Titania and runs out.

**SLY**

We're not having Edmund back again.

Everyone starts out.

**HEMINGES**

Sold another of our plays, no doubt.

**TITANIA**

A fine pack of wolves, picking on poor Will like vultures pecking at  
a carcass.

**BURBAGE**

Harry, what is it? What is that?

**CONDELL**

(reading the bloody piece of paper)

"When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes  
I all alone be-weep my outcast state

**BURBAGE**

Will's sonnets.

**CONDELL**

"And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,"

**CONDELL**

"And look upon myself and curse my fate."

**SLY**

Who's blood?

Burbage has the actors changing the set to...

**SCENE 4 - A SIDE CHAPEL IN ST. PAUL'S, DEC. 28, 1607**

Edmund comes stumbling into the chamber,  
running from the Steward's dagger, carrying  
the ribbon-tied bundle of ripped pages, now  
drenched in blood. His clothes are in shreds,  
his face bloody, there are knife wounds above  
his eye and in his right side and left thigh.

Two beats behind him the Steward staggers on  
as bloodied and wounded as Edmund, holding a  
blood-dripping dagger.

**STEWARD**

Give it.

The Steward swipes at the bundle, cuts the  
ribbon. Both scramble for the falling pages.

**EDMUND**

They're not yours.

**STEWARD**

Your name's not on them.

Both reach for pages. Edmund gets a deep  
forehead cut, while slicing the Steward's arm  
and cheek.

**EDMUND**

Is yours?

**STEWARD**

I got them by my master's hand.

The WANDSMAN rushes in. He tries but fails to  
stay clear of the fighting. Squaring off,  
Edmund's bleeding blinds him. The Steward has  
to hold his cheek together.

**WANDSMAN**

Gentlemen, not here!

The **BISHOP**, bitter, 49, of smarmy charm, enters as the Wandman scurries about sopping blood and gathering sonnet pages.

**BISHOP**

Stop. Stop! (they don't) this is god's house. You can not kill each other here.

**EDMUND**

Every word bespeaks the author's name. And it's not your master's, whoever he may be.

**BISHOP (CONT'D)**

Wandman, you're god's house keeper. Don't just stand there. Call the watch!

**STEWARD**

He that owns it, names the use of it.

Edmund stabs the Steward. The Steward drops the few pages he's gathered.

The Wandman is transfixed, trembling. The Bishop grabs pages from the Wandman and exits.

Edmund stoops to grab more pages, bumping the Wandman. The Steward, lunges, stabbing Edmund.

**WANDMAN**

Oh, dear lord. They're only poems. (more brawling bring on panic) They are... They are... Oh, god, oh god, THEY'RE KILLING EACH OTHER!

The Wandman rushes to exit, but crashes into...

Will runs in. The Wandman knocks Will off-balance just as the Stewart lunges at Edmund who, leaping back, is blocked by Will, causing him to sustains a fatal stab.

**WANDMAN**

It's done!

Will grabs Edmunds knife hand. Unable to stop, the Steward falls onto the knife in Edmund's hand but thrust forward by Will. He's dead.

**WANDMAN (CONT'D)**

Praise god.

The Wandman, who's been peeking between his fingers, now helps Will drag Edmund from under the fallen Steward. Will collapses under the weight of Edmund now in his lap.

Edmund doesn't recognize Will due to the blood. He panics, struggling to get free but Will holds tight.

**EDMUND**

What are you doing?

**WILL**

Getting the blood out of your....

**EDMUND**

(panicking, feels the pain of his wounds)

Blood? My blood?!

**WANDMAN**

Not entirely.

The Wandman daintily covers Edmund's wounds  
with the few pages keeping most.

**WILL**

We need a doctor.  
Get a doctor!

**WANDMAN**

You have to take him away.  
This is a church, not a...

**EDMUND**

Ohh! (a stabbing pain)  
Where am I?  
Who are...

**WANDMAN (CONT'D)**

In Suppliant's chapel.  
St. Paul's. I, the wandman.

**WILL**

What happened?

**EDMUND**

A fight, you fool.

**WANDMAN**

The Bishop's gone for  
The watch.

**WILL**

For god's sake, a doctor!

Edmund, struggles to his feet. Will helps.

**EDMUND**

Leave off. (suddenly stops, looks up to heaven) Oh, god.  
Edmund turns and slowly sinks in a faint.

**WILL**

Edmund!

Will grabs him from behind and holds him as  
both land on the floor.

**WANDMAN**

Dear Lord in heaven, help us all.

Nearly choking on the blood, Edmund clears his  
eyes enough to see that it is Will.

**EDMUND**

Will? What are you doing here?

**WILL**

(charmingly self-deprecating)  
Behold the dragon.

**EDMUND**

It wasn't my fault, Will.

**WANDMAN**

The man is dead. You killed a man for poems.

**WILL**

A doctor. Fly!

The Wandman runs out.

**EDMUND**

(to Will urgently, privately)  
I never mentioned your Earl.

**WILL**

(quietly to Edmund re: the bloodied pages )  
These are my...?

Edmund wails with pain and falls against Will.  
Will cradles Edmund, knowing he's near death.

**EDMUND**

I knew you wouldn't want anyone to...

**WILL**

Shh, shh.

**EDMUND**

To read your private....

Edmund gives Will the purse Will gave him.  
The guards leave. Wandman tries to bless  
Edmund. Will and Edmund keep him away.

**WILL**

I should never have brought you up to London.

**EDMUND**

(gasping to get it out before he dies)  
Tom Quiney, he covets your Judith's portion.

**WILL**

Others, too.

Condell and Rice come running in.

**EDMUND**

Thom Quiney's had your  
Jude. And, don't leave  
Anne so much alone with  
Gilbert. She will blame  
you for this bloody work.  
Not I.

**WILL**

Has he?  
Rest.  
Mother...?  
Of course,

Edmund grabs Will for a kiss.

**WILL**

I dreamt a dream a day or two ago.

**EDMUND**

Another midsummer vision of delight?

**WILL**

O no, if this were seasoned, 'twere autumnal. I'm drowning in a  
murky river, gasping for my life...

**EDMUND**

(his last words)  
Remember me, with more of love than I deserve.

**WILL**

My heart is... (Edmund dies) No. No, no, no.

Will tries to speak, but he's lost for words  
and in pain, guilt, fear (of telling mother),  
anger, et al.

Condell moves to help, but Will drags the dead  
body away toward what would be the altar (the  
audience) silently pleading for help from god.  
He falls with Ned in his arms.

**WILL**

I saw you first when I was new sixteen,

Pissing in my face for want of swaddling clothes.  
 I held the all of you. How easily  
 You fit along my forearm. Held you then...  
 Whene'er you cried for me to feed a milk  
 Dipped tit in hunger for the one our worn  
 And weary mother rarely tendered.

**CONDELL**

Will?

Church bell rings, off. Condell and Rice help  
 Will up and carry Edmund off.

The Wandman kneels and wipes up the blood a  
 few moments, in tears. He sees the blood  
 stains on his robe which frightens him.  
 Tearing at them, he runs out.

**SCENE 5 - THE BISHOP'S CHAMBER, ST. PAUL'S - EVENING.**

The **BISHOP** of London, 49, is reading the  
 bloody pages. He's intrigued, but confused.  
 Momentarily, the Wandman, now in clean robes,  
 enters in distress, and several times tries to  
 speak, but can't. He falls to his knees  
 mumbling his rosary. The bishop embraces him,  
 blesses him, then goes back to reading.

Will storms in followed by Condell and Rice.  
 He's a different character, commanding, yet in  
 denial, refusing any countervailing attitude.

**WILL**

Give me my brother's manuscript.

**BISHOP**

(smarmy)

Take heart, your brother is at peace, now.

**WILL**

He is worm meal.

**BISHOP**

Dust unto dust unto the last...

**WILL**

(in the Bishop's face; offended by the sanctimoniousness)

What a sad and careless god you have, to let this be.

**BISHOP**

If he lived in god-fearing righteousness he'll be in heaven with his  
 Lord, watching over...

**WILL**

He lived in church-dodging freedom from priestly sanctimony, that's  
 how he lived.

**BISHOP**

And died for words upon a page.

**WILL**

(turns away)

For words? Gone for so  
 little?

**BISHOP (CONT'D)**

It's not as though they're  
 god's words.

**CONDELL**

Aren't they?

**BISHOP**

(signaling the Wandman to silence)

Wandman, come away. Death's part of god's just plan.

Appalled, Will leaps toward the Bishop but  
Condell holds him back.

**WILL**

(holding in his tears)

God's plan? This death was Ned's deep love avowing.

**BISHOP**

You have brought murder to my house...

**WILL**

If there's a murderer here, look ye to god!

**BISHOP**

... so you would curse our lord for this?!

**WILL**

Would you prefer I curse you in god's name?

Will wipes the bloody dagger on the Bishop's  
robe. The Bishop knocks it away.

**BISHOP**

Take your brother's body and get out of my cathedral!

**WILL**

He's out and in his box by now. (abruptly) I'll have him buried!

**CONDELL**

Three days to Stratford.

**WILL**

Here!

**BISHOP**

In London?

**WILL**

Just where he is.

**WANDMAN**

Only a pauper's field would welcome him.

**WILL**

Here. In a consecrated grave.

**WANDMAN**

In god's anointed ground!?

**BISHOP**

Not at St. Paul's.

**WANDMAN**

The Sexton says, the graveyard's full.

**WILL**

Nay, within the very sanctuary; god's own house. How much?

Will weighs the now-bloody purse Ned returned.

**WANDMAN**

An actor?

Condell has to hold back Will.

**WILL**

Aye!

**BISHOP**

Impossible.

**WILL**

Nothing's impossible with gold, not in a god's house...

**BISHOP**

This is the king's  
cathedral! There's nothing  
Suitable here...

**WILL**

Here's where you spend it.  
aye? You. Don't you?  
How much?

Will grabs Edmund's dagger from Rice, spinning  
around, threatening a disbelieving Bishop.  
The Wandman is whimpering in fear.

**BISHOP**

Perhaps there's space...

**WILL**

Within the Church.

**BISHOP**

The Church of the Saviour.

Will looks to Condell for clarification.

**CONDELL**

Near the Globe.

**RICE**

Not a stone's throw.

**BISHOP**

You don't know your parish church?

**WILL**

Like God, my busiest day is Sunday. In the Sanctuary.

The Wandman shakes his head. The Bishop nods.

**WILL (CONT'D)**

Done! And now, sir, the manuscript.

**WANDMAN**

The bloody pages?

**WILL**

The blood is for remembrance.

**BISHOP**

(after a beat)

I'll have my deacon make a clean copy for...

**WILL**

I will have them, now, your grace.

**BISHOP**

I don't think so.

**WILL**

I insist.

The Bishop whispers to the Wandman who goes.

**BISHOP**

You'll need more than threats or gold to get them now.

**WILL**

Then let's try this.

Will grabs Edmund's knife from Condell and shoves the Bishop against a pillar, the dagger at his throat.

**CONDELL**

Will, calm yourself!

**RICE**

Master Will.

**BISHOP**

You're already marked a murderer.

**WILL**

Then what have I to lose?

**BISHOP**

Only a fool would slay the Bishop of London in his own cathedral.

Takes the sonnets from the Bishop's hand.

**WILL**

I've played the motley fool so oft the fashion fits my nature. And wouldn't such a death be just the answer to your daily prayer, to match the martyrdom of Becket? I'll have the bloody pages.

Unseen by Will, the Wandman leads in two guards with heavy chain and halberds. They threaten Condell and Rice and move to Will.

**BISHOP**

You killed a man.

**CONDELL**

Will!

From behind, one guard lobs his chain over Will's head, around his neck. The other grabs the knife while holding off Condell and Rice.

**WILL**

Defending a threatened brother. There was no murder, fool.

The guards secure the chain around Will.

**BISHOP**

(to Condell and Rice)

Get ye gone! Or go with him to gaol.

**CONDELL**

Give us a day, Will!

Will nods to his friends to go. They exit as he is dragged away. The lights change to....

## ACT TWO

### SCENE 6 - GAOL CELL, THE CLINK, 1509/10

A dungeon cell with a cross-lattice wall.

A few prisoners in rags, keeping their misery to themselves.

Shackled, Will is led by the **GAOLER, late-30's**, who unlocks the cell door, then turns to "invite" Will in, unlocking the chains.

**GAOLER**

Not pleased to put a gentleman in this'un. Full up, all around, y'see. Can't do ye better, as I usual try, for quality - the clean sort, anyway. How long ye 'xpect to be...

As the Gaoler drops the chains and bends to pick them up, Will grabs the Gaoler's hand and twists it behind his back. Will's other hand pulls a dagger out of his boot which he holds to the Gaoler's throat.

The Gaoler chuckles, then struggles.

**GAOLER (CONT'D)**

Didn't 'xpect this sort of roughness from a poet.

Gaoler pushes the blade of the knife into the handle, rightly guessing it was a stage prop.

**GAOLER (CONT'D)**

(re: stage knife)

Saw you with it in crookback Richard III, I did. Liked that 'un.

Gaoler gets his dagger and jabs at Will who backs off, holding up his hands in surrender.

**GAOLER (CONT'D)**

Seen a-many o'your stage works, thanks to the missus.

**WILL**

Your wife's attends the theater, does she?

**GAOLER**

Pinks your Spanish hose.

**WILL**

Pardon?

**GAOLER**

My loving wife's your sewing lady.

**WILL**

Titania?

**GAOLER**

Now how would you know to use that name?

**WILL**

What name should I call her?

**GAOLER**

Ain't she a devil. Real name's Drus'lla. I'm the only one's supposed to call her Titania. After your fairy tale play.

**WILL**

You're her infamous Oberon.

**GAOLER**

Horvald, really. Mouthy woman, as certain you must know.

**WILL**

Why Oberon?

**GAOLER**

Had us a little disagreement bout our little laddy-boy. (having founds a stool and a bucket, sets them near the door for Will) Oh, did she get hot angry, 'n' cursed me as a wretched Oberon - she'd seen yer play.

**WILL**

She never mentioned having a boy?

**GAOLER**

(tries but can't hold back the tears)

Wouldn't, would she? Died, age seven and a bitter sweet summer. My fault. Saddest day of me life. Beg your forgiveness, sir.

**WILL**

No shame. Pour out your grief.

**GAOLER**

We argued on the boy, sweet Tits and I. I wanted him with me here at my side, didn't I? She wouldn't have it, not amongst these wretched. But like yer fairy king, I took him, damn the day. And she were right. The little lad, he caught his death and...

**WILL**

Had you no other child?

**GAOLER**

An angel of a lass; straightway she went to god from out her womb.

**WILL**

A daughter can be such a comfort. But better quick, perhaps.

**GAOLER**

Whether to punish for ill-caring of the boy, or penance for the fighting over him, no way to know. And so she called me Oberon.

**WILL**

Why that?

**GAOLER**

She'd seen your play, and saw in me your thieving Oberon who took the foundling child. Still does whenever she gets hot, but now it's more with charm than bitterness. Ne'er knew where came the name till two years after when she started sewing up your hose and brings me once see your play of summer dreaming, and ever after I call her my sweet Titania.

**WILL**

We call her Tits, for short.

**GAOLER**

That, too? And she lets you?

**WILL**

Not lets, but we do it.

**GAOLER**

Doesn't like it when I do, but she's got bigguns, ain't she? Only do it when she's on me; shouts me down with "Bottom's Ass!" and such.

**WILL**

How did...?

The Gaoler fighting tears, raises a hand to hold off any more questions.

**GAOLER**

But, enough, sir, got m'rounds. (turns to other) You lot best come with me.

While the Gaoler herds the other together.

**WILL**

A kindly man who lives by a monarch's bounty,  
And buys his royal bread with loyal list'ning  
For's reports.

**GAOLER**

Leave this 'un to hisself.

**WILL**

What could I plot for him to spy? What action might I choose locked in a cell, save caged reaction?

**GAOLER**

Him's poet to the king.

The Gaoler herds the prisoners out.

**WILL**

Alone. And isolate. Sans friend. Sans food.  
And desolate, sans pen and ink. We proud  
Patina'd Englishmen, so slow to shed  
Our adolescences and age, enveil  
Our truer selves until some crack of fate  
Doth bolt us sprawling in the muck  
Of history. I fear the ass's hoof of time,  
With madness now a-rearing, soon will kick  
Me to an age I dread I'll wish it hadn't.  
I fear I ne'er will rest out of my grave.

He senses a presence, then muffled chatter.

**EARL (O.S.)**

Will?

The Gaoler appears with a candle, leading  
**Henry Wriothesley, 34, The Fourth EARL of  
Southampton**, carrying two glasses and a  
crystal decanter.

**EARL**

Will Shakespeare? (embarrassed moment) Ah. The Gentle poet in a bloody gaol. (to the Gaoler) The key, warden, the bloody key.

**WILLS**

Harry. It's been some time...

**EARL**

(taken aback)

Harry? (warming) Yes, we did once use our given names.

The Earl enters the cell.

**WILL**

We did.

**EARL**

Once upon a time. In private.

The Gaoler locks them in. The Earl starts to object, but the Gaoler wags a finger and exits. An uncomfortable moment: to embrace or not to embrace, that is the issue. They don't. The tension is palpable.

**WILL**

These three long years. I've only ever seen you in the stalls...

**EARL**

My fortunes in Virginia, attention day and night.

**WILL**

... of the Globe or lurking in the shadow of the King's bedazzle during court performances...

**EARL**

I'm wrestling even now for a new royal compact.

**WILL**

...peering at my plays with increasingly less-than-enthusiastic grimaces upon your still surprisingly pretty face.

**EARL**

Yes, well, I have a family.

**WILL**

I heard. I hope they are well?

**EARL**

As family's go.

**WILL**

I warned you about....

**EARL**

You admonished me, praising marriage, in seventeen sonnets.

**WILL**

Not for wedded bliss. To pass on form and beauty

**EARL**

Aye, for fatherhood. Thanks.

**WILL**

Your mother paid me well for those.

An embarrassed pause.

**WILL**

You never stop back after performances.

**EARL**

(slipping into the old familiarity)

I steal away when I can, Will - intrigued as I am of late with your strange, much darkened moods and offerings.

**WILL**

Ah, my work is less than pleasing to you, too?

**EARL**

Never less than thoughtful. As always... unexpected.

**WILL**

But lately...?

**EARL**

Gloomy, touching hopeless. That Coriolanus cad - what a piece of work that fellow, eh? And his mother. (quoting) "Anger's my meat; I sup upon myself, and so shall starve with feeding."

**WILL**

You memorized the lines?

**EARL**

It's burned upon my brain from a single viewing. Puts me in mind of how we spoke of both our mothers, years ago. How's yours?

**WILL**

Not long for this world, I fear. Sorry, for your loss.

**EARL**

Fear? 'Twas once your heart's most ardent prayer, muttered smartly, aye, then followed by the persistent wish for a wife struck mute.

**WILL**

She's turned the art of nagging to a whip.

**EARL**

You seem too like your recent characters. Poor Will, meandering in the sullen byways of his mind. Too intense for happiness. N'est pas?

**WILL**

My consistent intensity, you once told Essex, Raleigh and the rest a-feasting, was what you most appreciated of "your" poet, my serious lightness, my wit-tinged madness.

**EARL**

In small doses, yes, but... I wonder, watching you, these days, how does it play as life, once youth's soft promises are spent?

**WILL**

Or spoiled. (bitterly) Or spurned.

**EARL**

Enough old times. Burbage thinks you're in grave trouble here.

**WILL**

You come at Burbage's request?

**EARL**

I was surprised to learn that a player ever so mindful of the law would take up lodging in the dungeon of the Clink?

**WILL**

Your bishop's doing.

**EARL**

My Bishop! No. What is the crime?

**WILL**

**EARL**

The mis-deeds of a very	
weighty day. Edmund is dead.	Your brother?
A dagger in the heart.	Dead?
Saving our sonnets, aye.	Which sonnets?

**WILL (CONT'D)**

Ours. To keep them from a printer's mischief. There was a fight and Edmund knifed. When called to help, I, like a feckless Romeo, I made the matter worse. And worser still, was roused to slit a gloating Bishop's throat. But thought the better of it.

**EARL**

Even so. The Bishop's court will have you crucified.

**WILL**

They'd never waste a cross on me. Then too, there's worse to come.

**EARL**

What could be worse?

**WILL**

For me? To tell my mother her last child died youthful in my arms. I was her first and owed her, for her womb-time, more loving care of her last.

**EARL**

And worse for others?

**WILL**

You. The sonnets, those I wrote to give you immortality, your Bishop has them.

**EARL**

(stunned, tries to hide his concern)  
Old poems on marriage? How "worse" for me?

**WILL**

And all the others. All.

The Gaoler enters with a note for the Earl.

**EARL**

The others. All?

**GAOLER**

Milord.

**EARL**

My name's not on these poems, is it?

**WILL**

Why would I name my lo...

**EARL**

But your name is?

**WILL**

I would think.

**EARL**

You don't know. Did you claim them.

**WILL**

Claim, I demanded them as...

**EARL**

As your own?

**WILL**

No, it was...

**EARL**

Then they're deniable.

**GAOLER**

Milord?

The Earl takes the note and reads. Deciding he has to go, he gestures for the Gaoler to wait.

**WILL**

(about the note)

Great matters of state, no doubt? A new Virginia charter?

**EARL**

A troublesome request, no more. (sympathetically) Your brother...

**WILL**

Our sonnets.

**EARL**

They're not our sonnets, Will, they're...

**WILL**

Now held hostage, by your King's exacting Bishop of London, to some ill-purpose. He hates all players, mostly me as leading them to hell. He'd have me headless, doubt it not. And you in the Tower of London, if King Jemmy's true to form.

The Gaoler "Ahem's" to remind them he is there and cannot help listening.

**EARL**

I've learned how to avoid the Tower and its depraved.

**WILL**

(sotto voce)

Well if you don't, request this gentle turnkey. You'll need him at your service. Fair justicer of the underworld. He is my Oberon.

**EARL**

(looking over the Gaoler) Thank you.

**WILL**

So, you will do what you can.

**EARL**

To gain your release?

**WILL**

To get them back. The sonnets. He'll use them and not nicely?

The Earl pockets the note and moves to leave.

**EARL**

Aye, he will. So then I'll have to, won't I?

**WILL**

Will I see you again?

The Earl waves the note, his reason for haste.

**EARL**

I'll send to you when we can sup at Hampton House. My family...

**WILL**

Can be troublesome, I know.

An awkward embrace completed, the Earl goes.

**GAOLER**

Look in on you, Master Shakespeare... (starts to go) when I can.

**WILL**

Thank you, Oberon.

**GAOLER**

Horvald, here, sir, if you please, Horvald Hamage.

**WILL**

As you wish.

**GAOLER**

About the boy.

**WILL**

Be not embarrassed, man.

**GAOLER**

God ye, goode'en.

Gaoler exits. Will paces.

**WILL**

There are no ghosts, I know, but I am haunted  
 Here more than I've been in seven years.  
 Since my lad died; a cracking voice, two bright  
 And willful eyes, a callow smile e'er cries  
 Me to my sleep. Now will my thwarted Ned  
 Hang in my heart and gnaw me to my ruin.  
 Here is the coldest shadowpit of a sore  
 And rabid world, where lords from vanity  
 Fling fools to rot, and misbegotten  
 Monarchs shackle truthers in, as miscreants.  
 Stop thinking; sleep, sour poet. Penless, fool.  
 Then put it down in ink in mem'ried time.  
 Have ever I conceived a heart that can  
 True love its fair, if petty, treasons grant?

## SCENE 7- LONDON HOUSE, ALDERSGATE - FEBRUARY 1608

The Bishop sits talking to the Sexton, mid-30's, scholarly, exacting, preternaturally suspicious.

The Wandman shows in Fletcher, hands the Bishop the roll of bloody sonnets, then whispers in the Sexton's ear.

**WANDMAN**

Your grace.

**BISHOP**

There you are, John. (introducing) John Fletcher. My new Sexton. Very learned in the law. Very valuable to the church. You're well?

The Bishop waves at the Wandman to go.

**FLETCHER**

(suspicious at being summoned late at night)

Rosy cheeked and frisky. As you see.

**BISHOP**

What I see is the son of a dear departed mentor with a surly scowl.

**FLETCHER**

Not surly, no, your grace. I am the youngest son of your once-upon-a-time superior sporting an I've-been-through-this-before-what-will-he-want-from-me-this-time question in my mind.

**BISHOP**

Verbal gymnastics, is it?

**FLETCHER**

Memories of youth.

**BISHOP**

The Wandman's shown you these? And you've read them?

**FLETCHER**

Twice over, every one.

**SEXTON**

Strange you're still in London, Master Fletcher.

**FLETCHER**

Strange?

**SEXTON**

The raging plague has shut the theatres.

**FLETCHER**

It has.

**BISHOP**

You've been working with William Shakespeare, I'm told.

**FLETCHER**

You've been misled, your grace.

**SEXTON**

Your Shepherdess play was recently seen in his theater.

**FLETCHER**

Master Shakespeare's one of seven sharers, sir. The artistic generosity he's shown my writings hardly constitutes collaboration.

**SEXTON**

So you've never worked with him.

**FLETCHER**

I read him pages as he hangs his costumes after a performance. He points out errors.

The Wandman brings in Thomas THORPE.

**WANDMAN**

Your grace.

**BISHOP**

Who's this?!

**THORPE**

Thorpe, your worship. Thomas Thorpe.

**SEXTON**

The printer, your grace.

**THORPE**

Sign of the Crow's Plume, St. Paul's, Warwickshireman, Stratford Upon Avon.

**SEXTON**

He who sought out Edmund Shakespeare to give surety of the poems.

The Bishop shows Thorpe the poems.

**BISHOP**

What do you know of these?

**THORPE**

Ah. (the blood scares him) Very private poems, your grace.

**BISHOP**

Which you had plans to publish?

**SEXTON**

Did you seek th'approval of Bishop's ecclesiastical court?

Thorpe grins and shrugs.

**THORPE**

I did not know the need.

**BISHOP**

How came you by this manuscript?

**THORPE**

A gentleman brought it to me.

**SEXTON**

What "gentleman?"

**THORPE**

Didn't say.

**SEXTON**

Describe him.

**THORPE**

Sent his steward.

**SEXTON**

Rack him.

**THORPE**

No. Please.

**BISHOP**

Have him flogged.

**THORPE**

Your grace.

**SEXTON**

The dedication thanks a Master W.H.

**THORPE**

Came with the manuscript.

**BISHOP**

I'll have the name.

**THORPE**

I cannot give, your grace, what I don't have.

The Wandman leads Thorpe out.

**BISHOP**

(glancing through the sonnets)

The king thinks Shakespeare his best poet.

**FLETCHER**

Better even, as he should, than all we educated college wits.

**SEXTON**

Not educated? And he's a poet? Does the king know this?

**FLETCHER**

Is the king displeased with these?

**BISHOP**

He hasn't seen them yet.

**SEXTON**

Wouldn't you feel the fool to find that a flattering upstart in your royal livery is a degenerate pervert?

**FLETCHER**

Since when are intimate indiscretions a problem for our new Scots monarch?

**SEXTON**

When they become public!

**BISHOP**

I'm told these were composed for and about a "noble youth."

**SEXTON**

A pretty courtier, perhaps  
an earl who once rebelled  
against the crown. Grown now.  
Who might that be?

**FLETCHER**

(checks the pages)  
How would I know?  
I read no mention of an earl.

The Earl barges in. The Wandman huffing  
behind.

**EARL**

(brandishing the note he got in Will's cell)  
Unannounced, as your note requested.

**BISHOP**

Ah, milord.

The Bishop turns to the Sexton who gestures  
he'd rather remain anonymous.

**EARL**

Master Fletcher.

The Bishop holds up the poems.

**BISHOP**

A hundred-fifty-odd sonnets under the name of William Shakespeare.

**SEXTON**

You know them, of course.

**EARL**

What are they to me that I should be so summoned? And who are you  
to ask?

**BISHOP**

My legal advisor in matters ecclesiastical, Sexton Donal Bray.

**EARL**

I thought a sexton was employed in digging graves.

**SEXTON**

One way or another, your grace.

**BISHOP**

These sonnets were being peddled for publication.

The Bishop gestures for the Earl to take them.  
The Earl reaches for them, but pulls back.

**EARL**

How came they to be bloodied?

**FLETCHER**

They are impassioned and cut sharply to the heart.

**EARL**

Are they, Master Fletcher?

**BISHOP**

And dedicated to a Master W.H.

**SEXTON**

Your initials are W. H. are they not, Milord?

**EARL**

They're mine reversed. I am Henry Wriothseley.

**SEXTON**

Reversed, a clever but frequent ruse.

**EARL**

(perusing the poems, to hide his recognition)  
No poet would dedicate his work to an Earl addressing him as Master.

**SEXTON**

It does suggest an unusual degree of intimacy,

**BISHOP**

Aye, it does.

**EARL**

Will's name upon a page gives no assurance who has authored what may follow.

**SEXTON**

(emphasizing the Earl's apparent familiarity)  
Will's name?

**EARL**

Can you prove these are from his pen?

**BISHOP**

He came to me demanding their return.

**FLETCHER**

Perhaps they're KingsMen property, bought off some cash-strapped errant fool for three pounds five.

**EARL**

Fair point. This is rare poesy.

**WANDMAN**

The claim was fifteen pounds, six, and five.

**SEXTON**

Think you that vagabond Will's incapable of such sublimity?

**EARL**

Master Shakespeare is a gentleman poet to the king.

**SEXTON**

I've heard he's an indifferent player with a sharp tongue, an unlettered lout...

Fletcher starts to object, but the Bishop silences him.

**SEXTON (CONT'D)**

... with a knack for arranging other people's work to fit his stage; good in business, crude in art.

**FLETCHER**

Many's the Oxford graduate who has accomplished less.

**SEXTON**

(to the Earl)

But you will vouch for him? You do know him.

**BISHOP**

My note requesting this interview, I'm told, found you with him.

**SEXTON**

In his cell.

**EARL**

(knowing he's being baited)

In my youth, he was employed by my late mother. No lout, I can assure you, then. Indeed, a clever witty fellow. (afraid of giving the wrong impression) Then. I was asked to see to his safety.

**BISHOP**

You were asked?

**SEXTON**

By?

**EARL**

A delegation of the King's Men who are expected by the King at nine.

**SEXTON**

And was he? Safe?

**EARL**

Heavily chained. Unquestionably secure.

**BISHOP**

Whoever's pen conceived these verses, the subject is clearly a vulgar relationship.

**SEXTON**

A noble youth, a vagabond poet. A crime against the king's commands. (no response; gets the poems) Did you ask if these were his poems?

**EARL**

No. I had no need to ask, nor reason. I know nothing of them. The man I once knew would never let such intimate writings be printed.

**SEXTON**

Would he not?

**BISHOP**

(suddenly threatening)

Your grace, if ever these verses are printed with whatever name, I'll have the author and the printer and the dedicatee before my ecclesiastical court.

**EARL**

Nothing to me. But court, your grace? On what charge would that be?

**BISHOP**

Blasphemy: they are an offence to god and king.

**SEXTON**

And therefore treason.

**BISHOP**

The time is coming these seditious clowns will play out their fantasticals in the Bloody Tower.

**EARL**

(indicating Fletcher)

Would that include this man?

**FLETCHER**

(to the Earl)

Your grace, you must believe...

**BISHOP**

(holding out a hand to silence Fletcher)

Like you, he came here unannounced, at my request.

**EARL**

On the occasion of these sonnets?

**SEXTON**

The well-trained eye of a Cambridge man can tell a crude country yeoman's labors from the elegant efforts of a noble spirit.

**EARL**

(to the Sexton)

Have you met him?

**BISHOP**

He held a dagger to my throat in my own chambers. I know him.

**EARL**

However much of a market town glover was William Shakespeare's youth, he's now a gentleman poet, and the king's favorite, with broad repute, and a coat of arms.

**SEXTON**

Granted no doubt at your influence.

**EARL**

What influence would I have? He is a member of the king's household.

**BISHOP**

My Sexton is a student of ancestry, milord.

**SEXTON**

For centuries you Earls of Southampton have held the post of Rouge Croix Garter Lord of Ancient Heraldry. Dispensers of all England's coats of arms. A great influence when it comes to raising a favored yeoman above his station.

**FLETCHER**

The arms were awarded his father who was no yeoman.

**EARL**

He was mayor of Stratford, with good lands by marriage into gentry.

**FLETCHER**

By most, Will's deemed a veritable god in the art of poetry.

**BISHOP**

Once, perhaps. When Gloriana held the throne. He's out of fashion now and little known.

**SEXTON**

(turning on Fletcher)

You think a glover's son capable of divinity?

**EARL**

Christ's father was a carpenter. And that's an end to this!

**BISHOP**

If not your friend, your grace, then who?

**EARL**

Find out. Name the poet or prove the player false!

**SEXTON**

A time-consuming effort

**BISHOP**

And expensive.

The Earl holds up a sack of coins.

**EARL**

Evidence. Witnesses. Until then you will set the poet free.

**WANDMAN**

When the charge is murder? I, I, I was there.

**EARL**

(in the Wandman's face)

Before god, did he not to stop a fight already gone fatal?

**WANDMAN**

Before god, (shrugging at the Sexton) it's true. I brought him there.

**SEXTON**

He attacked the Bishop of London!

**EARL**

The natural and excusable ill-temper of a sorely aggrieved and grieving brother. (tosses the sack at the Bishop) Incontrovertible evidence.

The Earl exits. The Bishop turns to Fletcher.

**BISHOP**

And there it is: my "What-will-he-want-from-me-this-time" charge.

**FLETCHER**

I'm to spy upon a friend? I have no talent for moral gymnastics, your grace.

Fletcher reaches for the sonnets, but the Sexton grabs them. Fletcher exits.

**BISHOP**

You'll have to prove the player wrote these on your own.

**SEXTON**

Incontrovertibly? Not 'less someone saw him pen in hand. But then, your grace, neither can he.... (thinking hard) And if he can't prove these his work, what can he prove he's written? How claims he to be poet to the king?

**BISHOP**

Does that matter in this?

**SEXTON**

No Lucrece? No plays? Indeed. The doubt alone will bring disgrace.

**BISHOP**

I want much more than mere disgrace. I want the perversion exposed and the atheistic depravity of this slug proclaimed. I want an end to theaters.

**SEXTON**

This arrogant king is more perverse than anything in these.

**BISHOP**

Aye, but God does not hold anointed kings to the laws of yeomen.

**SEXTON**

(with immense disdain)

James Stuart's sole concern with atheism's what it says of his self pro-claimed divinity.

**BISHOP**

Donal, you are a cleric of this church. His church!

**SEXTON**

The only sin our royal wretch will fight is rash humiliation. His own. How would he cringe to find his much praised poet proved a fraud? What then would the crowns of Europe think of England's wastrel king? Disgrace the poet; humiliate the king. Shame the king, ban the players. No players, no theaters. And bring the faithful back unto the church. More alms, more power. More power to purge the Puritans, sieze the Canterbury crown.

**BISHOP**

But first the proof.

**SEXTON**

Let me rack the man.

**BISHOP**

The king alone can grant such daring measures. He is a royal groom.

The Sexton carefully takes the Earl's coin sack from the Bishop.

**SEXTON**

To rescue the church, I'd rack the devil, if god himself gainsaid me. And suffer his damnation!

**BISHOP**

John! I know what you had to do... about the priest. And what it...

**SEXTON**

This one is worse, and mine.

He's gone. The Bishop smiles, worriedly.

**SCENE 8 - THE MERMAID TAVERN - APRIL 1608**

The King's Men eat and drink (men, boys, and Titania who sews as she drinks) at a long table.

Cooke, dressed as Bianca in Shrew, is reading his lines. Heminges enters and hands him a note.

**HEMINGES**

Tell him yourself.

**COOKE**

I can't.

Rice grabs the note, reads and passes it on.

**TITANIA**

You don't, I'll be sewing burrs in yer Puck britches!

Burbage enters, handing paper rolls to each man who look to see who they play.

**TOOLEY**

Wasn't I promised Goneril?

**BURBAGE**

(to Tooley)

You were not,

**COOKE**

(using his "stage seduction")

Master Burbage.

Heminges glances at Burbage, indicating Cooke's going to try to charm Burbage.

**BURBAGE**

Hmmm?

**COOKE**

(making light of the incident)

On me way back from me dad's, I, eh, stopped at Stratford, for...

**BURBAGE**

Feeding off Mistress Shakespeare's generosity, again?

**COOKE**

(getting the note from Tooley)

She gave me this to give to Will.

**HEMINGES**

(slapping Sand's head)

Master Shakespeare, to you!

No one sees Will and Fletcher enter in conversation.

**RICE**

How can man like Will be cursed with such a woman?

**BURBAGE**

God it seems, grants even Lucifer some devilish pleasures.

**COOKE**

(seeing Will)

There's news from Mistress Anne.

**BURBAGE**

(pocketing the note)

Will, Ralph comes at nine o'th'morning to copy out the roles. Tell me you've finished your "touch ups!"

**WILL**

And if I haven't?

**BURBAGE**

I shall lead these much perturbed men a forced march all the way cross London to that private sanctuary you keep with its accommodating French landlady and rescue it?

**WILL**

You wouldn't get passed her rolling pin.

**RICE**

(insinuating a racy affair)  
Landlady, hunh!

**TITANIA**

I would.

**TOOLEY**

I say he keeps a slave shackled to his desk.

**BURBAGE**

You're out of the Clink six months and what've we got. Shit.

**TAYLOR**

Scared of your lady wife?

Will grabs Taylor, his fist ready to slug him.

**WILL**

Who is going to tell me about my Anne?

Cooke is pushed him forward and handed the note.

**COOKE**

(starting out to charm Will)

Master Will, your gracious Mistress, Anne, last winter, surely you recall, did kindly then invite me stop at Stratford, as it's on my way to see me da, y'see.

**TAYLOR**

(nudging Will)

Your women do like 'em young and juicy, don't they?

**WILL**

Speak!

**COOKE**

(scrunching his eyes and stiffening against the anticipated blows)

Aye, sir. Mistress Anne, she sends word if you set out soon upon this season's tour, yer not to think yer welcome in her house.

Everyone "Oh's!", then as Will glowers, stops, waiting for a blow up that doesn't come.

**WILL**

Her house? (bluster) She's having you on.

**TITANIA**

Is she now?

**HEMINGES**

Don't think so, Will.

**TAYLOR**

What do you know?

**TITANIA**

I know if my man stayed away from me (to Will) as much as you from her I'd use the courts to drag ye back. O, I've a name for such as you.

The group jeers with ribaldry, as Will and Titania speak aside.

**WILL**

Aye. Oberon.

**TITANIA**

And how'd ye know of that?

**WILL**

He locked me in his dungeon, didn't he?

**BURBAGE**

Says here (referring to the note) it's her house...

**TITANIA**

(sotto voce to Will) Shoulda knowed he'd tell you that one.

Will grabs at the note, but Tooley passes it around again.

**BURBAGE**

(to the company, re: Will)  
You gave the house to her?

**TITANIA (CONT'D)**

(still privately to Will)  
Felt bad he did, to leave you there even for the night.

**HEMINGES**

Heard her say just that often enough, haven't we?

He's posted to the Tower now.

**WILL**

(aside to Titania, while chasing the note)  
Won't get him a better class of prisoner.

**BURBAGE**

I heard her many times claim rights to do with't as she pleases.

**WILL**

It's all the whores ye bring and your filth she dreads. I warned you men.

**BURBAGE**

Oh, we are welcome, Will. (pointing to the note) See here?

**COOKE**

(remembering words he's been given)  
Her pleasure's not to have you even in her second best bed, nay, in her sight, Master Will.

**WILL**

You dare say that to me, imp?

**COOKE**

She swore me, sir, if you gainsaid me, I'm to speak those very words, and you'd know I speak true. You're bound to wait till Michaelmas, lest she writes for you afore.

Will is speechless. Slowly laughter builds.

**WILL**

The woman can't write.

The laughter bubbles over into a roar.

**BURBAGE**

(holding out the note to Will)

Not cursive, but neat enough, in bold block letters.

**HEMINGES**

Seems somebody's taught her letters.

**WILL**

(grabbing the note)

If bitchy Missy Cooke here's to be believed.

**FLETCHER**

If you'd've written those honeyed sonnets to Mistress Anne, the Bishop's Sexton wouldn't be digging dirt to open up your grave.

**HEMINGES**

The Bishop of London?

**FLETCHER**

Set the dogs on Will, he has. It's true. Could it be your brother Dick's been writing all the works we think are Will's?

**WILL**

(after a distracted moment)

He'd have no trouble writing yours.

The men sense a challenge.

**FLETCHER**

It's not my writing's being challenged.

The company members laugh jeeringly. Will moves away, reading the note from Anne. Titania takes a mug to Will.

**BURBAGE**

Hold on! The Bishop doubts Will's writings?

**FLETCHER**

He's angling to close the public theaters permanently, and thinks to ruin Will's the way. He's got his vicious Sexton making inquiries.

Everyone mumbles wondering why.

**HEMINGES**

Because the groundlings fill our hats and not the Bishop's alms tray.

The Kingsmen hoot and holler their belief that they deserve the money more than the church.

The Lights focus down into Will speaking to Titania.

**WILL**

How shrewdly doth my shrew become a shroud.  
Else why'd she have me bear such cutting words?  
This gross rejecting missive is derision  
A weeping of disdain, a harpy's shriek -  
She knew these men would jeer it wantonly.  
What hope she's spent perfecting badgery...

**TITANIA**

Master Will! (takes his mug) No more!

She takes Will's mug to Burbage to refill.

**WILL**

... badgery  
Thus smotheringly be-girded in my time-  
Knit swatch, Whence one near day she'll glumly lay  
Me in my grave, her hand-wove sighing for  
My swaddled demise. What death-rag would she weave  
Were she to read my ravaged sonnetted heart  
That chronicles the bitter expectations  
Lived in anguished loyalty to amorous betrayals.

Burbage brings Will the now full mug.

**WILL (CONT'D)**

My Anne, you know, struggle every night  
To put out all the fires I live to light.

**BURBAGE**

As doth mine, too, betimes.

**WILL**

Mine, always.

**BURBAGE**

Nothing's always, Will. Even with a woman.

**WILL**

We've never spoken of wives, why's that?

**BURBAGE**

We've spoken endlessly of those you've written for the boys?

**WILL**

Our wives. Our women.

**BURBAGE**

You're much too busy, more content, creating those in your mind than  
loving those with their lips around your cock.

## SCENE 9 - THE LIBRARY OF SIR FRANCIS BACON - FEBRUARY, 1609

A long table and a few chairs, The Sexton  
paces, stops to peak at papers on the table.  
**Sir Francis BACON**, 48, enters in heavy robes,  
holding a bound manuscript in his folded arms  
against his chest.

**SEXTON**

So, Bacon, can you tell by reading who wrote that?

**BACON**

Sir Francis to you, sir! (chooses his words) So, you bring me this. You  
bid me, in the King's name so you say, to read it.

**SEXTON**

The Earl of Southhampton can affirm the king's...

**BACON**

Yes, yes! Well, I have read it. (looks at, handles the manuscript  
reverently) 'The Tragedy of Gowrie.' Until today, I've only ever known  
this play by rumor - rumors that the king it celebrates outlawed its  
playing, erased all traces of its writing, burned even its actors'  
rolls. Officially, its very existence denied to my face! And yet...

Here it is! It isn't rumor. I hold it in my hand. And now I've experienced it! Yet you have the boldness to ask, in the King's name, if I know of it, can I determine who wrote it. Of course, I can! How could I not? You too know, don't you?

**SEXTON**

Do I, sir?

**BACON**

Only one man could have written this. His imagination betrays itself with every word. Behind each twisted metaphor and turn of plotted purpose is the contradictory heart of living men.

**SEXTON**

How can you be sure?

Where?

You cannot be mistaken?

And there you see...?

Bacon glares at him. The Sexton holds out his hand, but Bacon keeps the script.

**SEXTON (CONT'D)**

This man you call Will Shakespeare is uneducated, base-born...

**BACON**

(with vehement disdain)

Why would the king send a mere Sexton for my judgment, now?

**SEXTON**

(unsettled by Bacon's continuing apparent loathing)

It is suggested... you're the author of this work and all the oth...

**BACON**

I am a lawyer not a poet. A scientist. You insult me, sir.

**SEXTON**

If you feel ill-used, (takes hold of the script) milord,

**BACON**

You think I'd claim another's work?

**SEXTON**

I beg you blame the king! (pulls at the script) I am but the messenger.

**BACON**

Who thinks that only learned man of rank can fashion beauty.

**SEXTON**

I don't believe that country yeomen's wives are birthing poets.

**BACON**

The Church of England holds a peasant's wife once bore a god.

**SEXTON**

And you don't!

**BACON**

Are we to have the Papal Inquisition now in England?

**SEXTON**

Are you a traitor, sir?

**BACON**

(threateningly)

You confuse art with theology.

**SEXTON**

You seem to think of Shakespeare's work as if it were a Bible?

**BACON**

There's more pure art in a glove-maker's stitch than in a tome of holy homilies by your book-learned apes of Oxford.

The Sexton tries to pry the script from Bacon's hand. There is a rip. Bacon let's go. The Sexton smiles and rolls it up.

**BACON (CONT'D)**

Allow me to write out a copy.

The Sexton shakes his head, slowly, tauntingly.

**BACON (CONT'D)**

It's England's heritage.

**SEXTON**

And Britain's shame!

The Sexton goes.

## SCENE 10 - THE KING'S PRIVY CHAMBER - JULY 1608

The Bishop enters with two large volumes, sets them on a side table paces. After a moment...

**James Stuart, KING James I of England**, James VI of Scotland, 42, appears in full regalia with a dense Scots brogue. He is drunkenly leaning rather too intimately on the broad shoulders of **Sir Robert CARR**, an amoral 19 year-old.

The King and Carr are chuckling, Carr trying to tie a ribbon on the King's codpiece.

**BISHOP**

Your majesty.

The King and Carr are startled to see the Bishop. Carr races to finish the ribbons.

**KING**

Bishop? What now, damn ye?

**BISHOP**

You sent a messenger - come immediately.

**KING**

Did I?

**CARR**

The matter of William Shakespeare, sire.

**KING**

Aye, Master Will. Sir Francis Bacon tells me you've set your toadies on my poet, again, ye sour saint. (no response) True or no?

**BISHOP**

We are gathering evidence, sire.

**KING**

Of what? (slaps Carr playfully) What sort of evidence?

**BISHOP**

Depositions from witnesses.

**KING**

(annoyed)

For fucking what this time?

**BISHOP**

A sordid relationship. Shakespeare and a young nobleman.

**KING**

My poet has many admirers.

**BISHOP**

Somewhat beyond admiration, this.

**KING**

A noble youth, y'say, a member of my court?

**BISHOP**

Rather vivid proof, your majesty. And as god representative on earth, you would not...

**KING**

You're not going to make me listen to it here, are ye? Not now.

The Bishop holds out a written deposition.  
Carr pats the codpiece, as if to say, "nice  
and tidy, now." The King kisses Carr and  
reads the deposition.

**KING**

I've gotten more out of a roast pig. Words are like knives, your grace, ye bloody well gotta prod and probe, then cut to the bone. Who is this Horvald Hamage?

**BISHOP**

Gaoler of the Clink when giving evidence. Now somehow he's gained promotion as a gaoler in your Bloody Tower.

**KING**

(reads)

"Did hear some talk of Master Shakespeare's "wit-tinged madness. Remembered that one, liked the words," Saucy fellow, aye? "well, he is a poet, ain't he, that one?" Indeed "wing-tinged madness," that's Master Shakespeare to a nonce, the fellow's got an ear, he has. "And then a few words 'bout the Bishop and...." What words?

**BISHOP**

Personal references not deemed relevant.

**KING**

Indeed. Well, your toadies have much to learn in the art of interrogation. You must have them watch me work. Bring them with you to court next time.

**BISHOP**

Anything else, your majesty?

**KING**

Go away now.

**CARR**

(reminding)  
Your new bible.

**KING**

My new Bible! Did you bring it?

The Bishop points to the two volumes. The  
king rushes to peruse them. Carr joins him.

**KING**

Finally. Seven years, Robin, seven...

**BISHOP**

Five, milord.

**KING**

One hundred twenty translators (peering at the Bible) and twelve  
editors. Still bickering over punctuation, I see?

**BISHOP**

And syntax.

**CARR**

A sin tax?  
For the Bible?

**BISHOP**

I had copies made, one each  
for you and Queen Anne. About  
the poet, sire?

**KING**

For god's sake, Bishop, what can it be you're after?

**BISHOP**

The security of our realm, sire. Your godly authority and your  
throne.

**CARR**

What has a poet to do with that?

**KING**

I like my poet. He is a groom of my privy chamber. He entertains me.

**BISHOP**

Yes, your majesty, but such corrupting players...

**KING**

Let The Puritans cavil. Master Will's the best. (about the Bible) He'd  
never be so clumsily as your academics with the words of god. No,  
no. The god who speaks through me must speak with eloquence. Now go.

**BISHOP**

Sire, what might I do to convince you of my...?

**KING**

Give me a bible worthy of Great Britain. This will not do. (loosens a  
codpiece ribbon) As for Shakespeare? Make no mistake. He's my poet.

**BISHOP**

Your majesty.

The Bishop exits.

**KING**

Robin.

**SCENE 11 - THE PARLOR OF SIR FRANCIS BACON - MAY 1609**

Bacon sits reading a manuscript, his delicate health bundled against the dampness. A stack of papers fills his lap, more stacks and rolls of manuscripts on the nearby table.

The Earl enter behind Bacon who merely stops then reads on.

**EARL**

I'm alone.

**BACON**

So am I.

**EARL**

And thirsty.

**BACON**

Drink.

The Earl goes to the side board, pours brandy, sees the food.

**EARL**

And starved.

**BACON**

Eat.

**EARL**

Very late for business

**BACON**

(turns to watch the Earl a moment)

Tell me, my young and oh, so eager earl, what game is this you're playing?

**EARL**

Game? None yet. What is your pleasure.

**BACON**

Master Shakespeare.

**EARL**

Will, believe me, is not a game.

**BACON**

The why do you play him for a fool?

**EARL**

I do not play him for anything. I've hardly seen him...

**BACON**

The Bishop of London's man offers you as affirming the king's intent to question his work.

Bacon turns to confront him. The Earl shrugs. Bacon finds a small booklet and tosses it to the Earl.

**BACON (CONT'D)**

You won't be able to deny he wrote these verses, I warrant.

**EARL**

Verses? (shocked as he

**BACON**

In which he has revealed more of

peruses the poems)  
'Sblood!  
Published?!

a man's soul than even angels have  
a right to. Love's ache has never  
been so plainly writ.

Bacon turns the booklet to a dog-eared page,  
moving away. Anxiously, the Earl reads.

**EARL**

How did you get this?

**BACON**

A friend.

**EARL**

Who?

**BACON**

A habit of secrecy is usually politic and often moral.

**EARL**

How long?

**BACON**

A few days? Sunday, I think.

**EARL**

This isn't the only one, is it?

**BACON**

The law allows a thousand to be printed.

**EARL**

Did your "friend" say where he got it?

**BACON**

St. Paul's yard. Off a very tall stack.

**EARL**

This is...

**BACON**

Revenge? Loving you must be a painful captivity, "Master mistress."

**EARL**

He promised me strange eyes would never see these.

Bacon grabs the sonnets.

**BACON**

Yet here they are. (guessing, hoping for a reaction) A year ago I heard a tale: a crafty Bishop scraping the much-soiled manuscript of these very sonnets off the blood-splattered stones of his private chapel after Will's brother fought to keep them from a printer's press, and died for his efforts. I asked to read them, then. I was rebuffed. And now...

The Earl tries to take the sonnets. Bacon holds on to them.

**EARL**

These could so ruin... everything.

The Earl spins around, thrusting a dagger at Bacon's throat, taking the sonnet booklet.

**BACON**

With our pederastic king? With your wife? (peering into the Earl's eyes, knowingly) With your investors? (off the Earl's surprise) Yes, the king's consulted me on the new power's you seek in your urgently sought new charter for Virginia. You have but a week to get him to sign it and prelude a parliamentary debate. To get it signed?

Bacon grabs the Earl's genitalia and obviously squeezes hard. The Earl drops the booklet on the table.

**BACON (CONT'D)**

Fail and your investors will ruin you, the Bishop will denounce you, and the king will turn you into a commoner. And so a whimsical king will be accommodated and a loving poet cast aside.

**EARL**

What do you imagine these poems seem to say?

**BACON**

Seem? Does it matter what seems? Your enemies will make your seems a fatal flaw. Of course, you could deny these, too. Like Peter denying Christ, you convinced the churchlings...

The Earl puts his dagger away. Bacon releases his grip.

**EARL**

But I have not denied him.

**BACON**

You've kept your distance from him since the king restored you to your nobility and wealth? Now you've suggested he's a fraud. How do you so casually betray such undying love?

The Earl yanks the pages out of Bacon's hand and holds them over a candle, burning them. Bacon slaps the Earl's face and tries to save the half-burnt booklet.

The Earl starts to draw his sword, but Bacon grabs the hilt. They struggle.

**BACON (CONT'D)**

Beware your grace. This bishop's dog will strike at anyone. The Bishop purpose is to shut the theaters to swell his collection box and keep the Puritans at bay, while he smarms his rise to the Archbishopric of Canterbury.

**EARL**

Smarms?

**BACON**

He deifies that Scottish burr stuck on the throne of England with every obsequious breath, playing vengeful angel, defending the royal sanctimony that the king may pose as England's first Apostle.

**EARL**

But you're the royal lap dog paid to legally defend each profligate prerogative? Your every breath supports the royal wretch at play as god.

**BACON**

I'm much in debt, so I must earn my lady's keep as best I can, but I am not blind.

The Earl thrusts his dagger into what's left  
of the smoking sonnets.

**BACON (CONT'D)**

How much in honor does it cost an earl to destroy a beloved poet for  
a wanton king under the influence of an ambitious Anglican cleric?

**EARL**

Evidently, not as much as supporting a king who you in politic and  
moral deceit, revile.

The Earl hoists the singed pages as Bacon  
picks up his books and exits.

**BACON**

Milord!

The Earl exits.

**ACT THREE**

**SCENE 12 - THE GREAT ROOM, NEW PLACE, STRATFORD**

**JUDITH ("Jude") Shakespeare**, 23, enters with  
an overflowing basket of foul papers in the  
other. She lights a a candelabra and one by  
one holds the papers over the flame burning  
them, each eliciting a different emotion,  
anger, wonder, disappointment.

After a moment, **ANNE Shakespeare** - 52, enters.  
She's a still handsome but nearly exhausted  
home maker, in effect the hands-on CEO of a  
large and demanding family.

**ANNE**

Jude! What art thou doing?  
Jude! Stop!

**JUDITH**

Do not stop me, mother;  
I beg you, help me.

**ANNE**

Thou wilt beg me nothing. Stop it!

**JUDITH**

Hast thou read these?

**ANNE**

Every one. (tries to save them) What good can come of burning paper?

**JUDITH**

Not the paper. The words. They're all he's ever got for us, if  
anything. These brings us shame. It doth my heart great good to...

**ANNE**

Hot ash won't cure thy bitterness.

**JUDITH**

Were't possible, I'd be a witch and bathe me with these wafting  
fumes to bring a curse upon so cruel an enemy.

Anne slaps her face.

**ANNE**

Thou wilt bring no witchery here! He's thy father, not thy enemy.

**JUDITH**

Does God countenance such a soul as these betray?

**ANNE**

God hath not the need? Anne Shakespeare hath the duty. And so hath thee, his daughter.

**JUDITH**

If my husband lived away from me, as yours does thee, I'd set the dogs o' the court against him.

**ANNE**

What law wouldst my firey Portia use against him?

**JUDITH**

A wife has rights. Gossip Grump, recall, she had her husband dragged back home from Bristol when he ran away.

**ANNE**

Goodie Grump was destitute. Thou art his well-kept daughter.

**JUDE**

Who'll ne'er be dowered enough to buy a tithe-land shepherd, all being portioned off for sweet and witty Susannah.

**ANNE**

That wouldst not move a court to any sanction against the man.

Enter WILL, gnawing a chicken leg and guzzling  
ale, filthy after a hard ride from Lincoln  
where he left the King's Men on tour.

**WILL**

Would the object of this  
legal disputation, "him,"  
refer to your father,  
daughter mine? Or Thom  
Quinney, that puny sniffer  
after sluts?

**JUDITH**

Da!  
  
Thomas Quinney, one day will...

Anne, now faced with her husband, is first  
defiant, then angry. She marches by him on her  
way to go, reaching for the chicken leg and  
the mug as she passes.

**ANNE**

Guests eat in the kitchen! Not in my great room.

Will grabs Anne's arm.

**WILL**

Guest, woman?! In my home, I eat where it is my pleasure to eat. (to Judith) What suit then have you for a court, daughter?

**ANNE**

Judith, do your chores.

**JUDITH**

Father, could we...?

Will knocks on the table and nods her out!  
"Dismissed," she goes. An uneasy silence.

Will goes to the table, looks at what is being  
burned. He angrily looks around at Anne. She

smiles but quickly looks away. He sits, puts his feet up on table, and belches. Anne immediately shoves his feet off the table and resumes the burning. He slams his hand on papers to stop her.

**ANNE**

I sent thee word thou wert not welcome till I called for thee.

**WILL**

This is my home!

**ANNE**

This is thy house.

**WILL**

Don't play at words with me, woman mine. And you will please not parse your pains with Puritan thee's and thy's. We're not in church.

**ANNE**

Nor on thy stage. Thy hou... (off Will's glower) your home, no doubt, is in some London brothel, from the smell of ye. What do ye want?

**WILL**

I have just ridden hard from Lincoln. I got word, not by my wife but by old Greenaway's niece, my mother's near her death?

**ANNE**

She was.

**WILL**

Was. Then she's recovered. (shrugs) I've come for naught?

**ANNE**

For naught! Aye, on her account, for she thought it best to get it done.

**WILL**

What done?

**ANNE**

The dying?

**WILL**

Mother?

**ANNE**

Dead! What had she left to live for since "my errant son's so long forsook his kin?" Her words.

**WILL**

Why wasn't I sent for, woman?

**ANNE**

Her wish. Not mine. She didn't think you'd want to take the time from making plays. As nor did I. So she got her living done and died.

**WILL**

And when's to be the funeral?

**ANNE**

Yesterday. So get ye back up upon your horse and ride away. Leave Stratford to the mourning. Sure Lincoln's mad with no Will Shakespeare there to entertain them.

**WILL**

Woman, that was my mother.

**ANNE**

How well I know it! These five and twenty years I've known she was your mother, with her better-than-thou demanding ways, haven't I?

**WILL**

Came with the marriage vows you happ'ly took.

**ANNE**

Not for you, god's truth! A week we're married and off you run again to play the towns of England.

**WILL**

I'd run off long afore your uncles made my da agree for us to marry. I told you then I wouldn't stay in earshot of her nagging da.

**ANNE**

Comes with family, don't it? Afraid to share the burdens?

**WILL**

Feared I'd end up pecked to living death like him.

**ANNE**

By me?

**WILL**

Your words. Your choices.

**ANNE**

So I these years am left alone while you, with all your Earls and elegant Ladies, and pretty Edmund, too, live high in London.

**WILL**

My Edmund does not live in London now.

**ANNE**

Where is he?

**WILL**

He is not.

**ANNE**

Is that just word play?

**WILL**

Not unless you think of death as a brain tease.

**ANNE**

Gone? Mistress Mary's last born child? How?

**WILL**

Brawling... (near tears) for my honor.

**ANNE**

You're hon...?

**WILL**

A manuscript of mine some whoreson tried to peddle. I've half a dozen watchmen searching out the clod...

**ANNE**

O Will!

**WILL**

To justice out his soul.

**ANNE**

(holding back tears)

All that charm and beauty gone to waste? Since when?

Will holds her comfortingly.

**WILL**

I buried him a year last New Year's Day.

**ANNE**

(pulls away)

A year last New Year's Day? So long and not a word?

**WILL**

You told me not to come.

**ANNE**

Not then! You could have writ. Too busy diddling dark-eyed ladies?

**WILL**

If you're so sure I live in luxury, and wallow in debauchery, why have you never come to Londontown to see, yourself? (stopping her response) I'll tell you why. You much prefer the illusion I am guilty to the truth that says you're wrong. It feeds your eternal anger.

**ANNE**

I'm not angry!! (the flare-up dying away uneasily) Not all the time! I just don't like you. Very much. Some of the time.

**WILL**

Tell me when you do. I'll schedule my comings then.

**ANNE**

Why so long this time?

**WILL**

I could not come, and then you wrote me not to.

**ANNE**

Where've you been?

She wraps her forgiving arms around him.

**WILL**

At the beck and call of a nasty king. Writing troubled plays. (thought almost overwhelming) Burying my youngest brother. (pulling himself together) Why did you write that note to stay away? You're always angry I'm not here? And angrier when I am? Why now?

**ANNE**

(after a pause)

I read your sonnets. (a beat) They were no play.

**WILL**

(caught off guard)

No.

**ANNE**

You don't know who you are, even now, do you, Will?

**WILL**

(stunned by her words, he turns away)

I am a well of words for the earthy why echoing out of the bottomless pit of souls I've given tongue to.

**ANNE**

(overhearing his private musing)  
Still lost, my passion? It is a labyrinth of guilt hid in o'er-cherished innocence.

**WILL**

Not lost. Remote, perhaps.

**ANNE**

From where you root your heart.

**WILL**

From whom. Who is a place I cannot ever truly leave.

**ANNE**

Then why...

**WILL**

I have a craving I cannot ignore for the beyond of any where. I feel a universe. I fear naught but the wrack of the censor, time, and chaos in the mind.

**ANNE**

You always want too much.

**WILL**

What is too much? More than a hearth, more than the paradise towards which we're schooled to crawl? I can't be crammed into such space as the world you're happy mistress of? London's more than a three day ride from Stratford. It's a star's throw from a waste of pride.

**ANNE**

At times I think your life is one long play.

**WILL**

How came you now to read them? My plays. How? Why?

**ANNE**

Your absences. They're longer. You silences, colder. Since...

**WILL**

Hamnet's death?

**ANNE**

And your loving father's. I wanted something of you, so...

**JUDITH (O.S.)**

Ma!

**ANNE**

I paid Judith and Gilbert to teach me letters.

**WILL**

Paid Judith? And Gilbert?!

**ANNE**

She helped me do block writing, too.

**WILL**

Aye, I've seen it, haven't I?

**JUDITH (O.S.)**

Ma?

**ANNE**

She needs you, Will. She's all the years since Hamnet's death in a sickly state, awaiting word from you, not a play, not a sonnet, just a word. But yours are all for your pen!

She exits. He puts his feet on the table.

### SCENE 13 - CARTER LANE, NORTH OF LONDON

**Adrian GREENAWAY**, 39, an ostler, closing up for the evening. Behind him the Sexton enters.

**SEXTON**

Adrian Greenaway about?

**GREENAWAY**

Greenaway? Aye, sir, Adrian Greenaway, at your service. Greenaway's Stratford Carriers, sign of the Bell, Carter Lane. London to Stratford, more'n thirty year now, me and m'pa, god rest 'is soul. If what ye wants a guide or - (leans in) protection, though's a bit late for travel - well, I come along for a shilling a day plus m'bed and victuals, and I do for the nag; saves a bit at the stables.

**SEXTON**

Will Shakespeare. Know him?

**GREENAWAY**

(surprised, looks him over)

Now who'd be comin' round in the dark of night enquiring after...?

**SEXTON**

The Sexton of St. Paul's. I come at the Bishop's bidding.

**GREENAWAY**

(peers at him then a change of attitude)

St. Paul's. Well, the Bishop, your reverence. Master Shaggy-peer y'say? I have been known to rent the man my Pease Bottom, time to time, big sturdy geldings. Five shil..

**SEXTON**

(sharply; taking notes)

Know him well?

**GREENAWAY**

Shakestaff?

**SEXTON**

Ever go along with him... as protection?

**GREENAWAY**

Here to Stratford? Not but once or twice, and years since. Knows the inns better than I; barmaids, too, f'ye know what I mean. (leans in) Hear he'd bed the innkeeper's boy if he's young enough. Will Shagger could find his way to Stratford, blind. Got a buxom wench...

**SEXTON**

Go along with him anywhere else?

**GREENAWAY**

Else? Shagspur? Never left London, and his mom being put in her grave.

**SEXTON**

(threateningly)  
Why kind of man is he? Kindly? Or...

**GREENAWAY**

(uncomfortable, begins to give what he thinks is wanted)  
Greedy bugger. Ev'ry penny put to work; hoards barley, closes off the open commons 'gainst the poor folk what need it. (leans in) What you will for a shilling, eh? Poor boy makes good. Don't know how.

**SEXTON**

(snidely pushing this along)  
Perhaps his betters

**GREENAWAY**

Betters?

**SEXTON**

Some nobleman, an Earl, perhaps, pays for his services?

**GREENAWAY**

(confused)  
Services? 'E says it's his theater writing. Hard to believe. Went to one of his theatre plays, once. The Globe? Says he wrote it out.

**SEXTON**

But you don't believe it.

**GREENAWAY**

'Struth, I got more education. Will had to leave off schoolin' early; (mimes drinking) his pa. Took to the road 'bout 13-14, playing maids with Queen's men.

**SEXTON**

Which play? The one you went to.

**GREENAWAY**

Ah! One about a Venice merchant, 's I 'member. Spits at Jews - not that they don't... Never seen a Jew. There's a pretty lady - too much money, and, and three boxes; never figured out what they's for. Something about a pound of man's flesh. Oooo! (shudders) Listening, all them words? Will Shakespeare? (shakes his head)

**SEXTON**

Ever seen him writing?

**GREENAWAY**

Writing? With a pen? Nah.

**SEXTON**

So you don't know if he writes or puts his name to other's words.

**GREENAWAY**

Other's words. Well, watching, I'd say that's Will up on that stage, hear 'im in every word: greedy like a Jew lender - ask Quinney 'bout Will's way with the gelt. And the merchant - boy lover, sure of it. Even the clown, Lancelot, eh? Will's such a fawner after nobility.

**SEXTON**

So, you don't...

**GREENAWAY**

Ask me, (on a roll) no Stratford glover's boy coulda strung all them words together, not like that. Yet he gets the money. Lives like a fucking king. Thinks he's a god.

The Sexton pockets his notes and walks off.

**GREENAWAY (CONT'D)**

Most of Stratford thinks so. But he won't stay there. Likes the London life. Wife, probably. (shudders) And, too, keeps the mystery alive, don't it, for them what don't travel out of Warwickshire. Let him be their god if so they want. Who am I to tell 'em he's a scoundrel?

Greenaway turns. He's alone and feels foolish.

**SCENE 14 - THE MASTER BEDROOM, NEW PLACE, STRATFORD**

Will sits editing a scene. Anne enters with mulled wine and a knitting sack. She slams a mug of wine on Will's table, then sits and knits.

**WILL**

Brave Anne; now knitting bolt of niggling don'ts  
With which to sacrifice this badgered heart  
Upon an altar swathed in wedded shame.  
She calls this what? A wifely duty done?  
Was it e'er love? Twas rash. Twas quick. Twas sweet.  
Now to my mind, her chilled autumnal rainbow  
Arc'd o'er my length of life, allows her heart's  
Refractions to enveil my days and blind  
Me in my sleep; an opaque mantle of  
Far from a fond affection lowr'd o'er  
Her every gossip's damning word; and yet,  
This ever present musky scent of womb.

After a moment, Ann gets a poker from the fire  
and jabs it into Will's mug, to heat the wine.

**WILL (CONT'D)**

My plays, found you much to like?

**ANNE**

To learn.

**WILL**

What? Tell me one thing.

**ANNE**

I know now how you see and show this family to your groundlings, all our pettiness and imperfections there to laugh at, all our lack of London manners.

**WILL**

And that angers you.

**ANNE**

Embarrasses. You put Judith's anger into that Regan woman. And in Goneril my...

**WILL**

Forcefulness and spite.

**ANNE**

(slaps at his head for that insult)  
Cordelia got Susanna's sweetness...

**WILL**

But your pluck. Susanna'd never stand to Lear as you do me.

**ANNE**

And Judith. Who is the man in Lear? Not grandpa, no. Some lord? Your earl?

**WILL**

Do you not find in Lear a mazement?

**ANNE**

No. A stupid hoary fool, like the ancient's god of Genesis.

**WILL**

He lives in what I am, I fear, becoming.

**ANNE**

My aging Will o'Warwick, you still want to be all the heroes and the villains of your airy dreams. Still find more joy in word games, poems and plays, than being husband, son, or father.

**WILL**

Nor living as a hearth-bound clod. A hearth that you Anne hath a way of reigning o'er as Bess once ruled this isle. Imperial, autocratic, whimsical, and seeming virginal. I tried.

**ANNE**

Not even for a week.

**WILL**

And failed. Who but a god could make the world you sought in seven days.

**ANNE**

Who but a child would run away?

**WILL**

I didn't run. I went to play my parts, as I had done since I was 13 years.

**ANNE**

But why? For once, just answer that.

**WILL**

O Anne, you heard it, and you loved it. For while I sheered and skinned and tanned, another world, of words of mystic magic, jangled my imagination, more even now than then. You knew it, aye? I gasped for new adventure as for air. Admit it, woman, please. In truth, you cheered when I rejoined the Queen's men in Lancastershire, hard on our Susie's birth. You sent me off the day o'the twins christening, your curse ringing in my ears, "You're only increased burden, Will, and more expense." Your words.

**ANNE**

Why even take a wife? You promised...

**WILL**

I never took a wife, I was gunned to church by the bride's brave brethren.

**ANNE**

Once upon a long slow twilight in a field near Shottery where we lay, you promised gallant wonders and a life...

**WILL**

You make up stories.

**ANNE**

As do you.

**WILL**

Yours out of anger, lies to validate imagined slights. Complaints to reap the sympathies of your gossips.

**ANNE**

Did you ever love me?

**WILL**

(startled)

I, I...

**ANNE**

You've writ a thousand lines of love in your fantastical life, and still you find no cause to say "I love you" to your wife.

**WILL**

I love...

**ANNE**

The memory of your dead little prince, our Hamnet.

**WILL**

Yes.

**ANNE**

Too late. His memory gets more care from you, than he did 'live.

**WILL**

I loved my father. But I was...?

**ANNE**

Not your mother?

**WILL**

Is it love, when you are flesh of her flesh and yet belittled, demanded of, used to please, wanted only for the pride of? Get none, hurt more, hated just enough for never being quite enough? There is but one known, undeniable deity in the world and that is each man's goddess Mother. I am created of her womb, blood of her blood, fed by her every sour or bitter mouthful, my very eyes saw light first thru her belly, the smell and taste of her body...

**ANNE**

Will, please!

**WILL**

(lost in his musings)

The father's seed you're seldom sure of, but who can deny the womb, no matter how painful the gestation, nor alarming the birthing out of nature's only Eden. And, O, my mother never tired of tattling all the pain I caused her coming out-and-into this sweet air of being, only to quickly prove unworthy of her blood and bonding. Love, wife? Know ye a couple you might wish to emulate?

**ANNE**

The one we dreamed of thirty long midsummer's eves ago.

**WILL**

Marriage is not a pretty play. There are no Romeos or Juliets but on the stage.

**ANNE**

Then wedlock's mostly tragedy?

**WILL**

Aye, of endurance more than despair. 'Tis less of love than patient, silent, lonely yearning. Deny it?

**ANNE**

It doesn't have to be like that.

**WILL**

(bitter)

Tell me, woman, with your vast experience, how else?

**ANNE**

Oh, Will, you see so little.

**WILL**

Do I? (a long deep thought; then in tears) I, I, I do.

**ANNE**

You step down off the stage, or try to look beyond your own imagination, suddenly you're blind.

**WILL**

I'm always on the stage.

**ANNE**

Not always. Only when you find yourself in need, and play at judge and executioner, speaking up as from a play you've writ, your groundling neighbors spell bound as if hearing Portia scolding Shylock. Like you did when your were Lawyer Snuggle's clerk in seventy six.

He's is overwhelmed by what appears to him as a "new" Anne. He kisses her.

**WILL**

Portia played a trick. Any half-weaned clerk from 'Sizes Court could best her brash assertion of the blood-taking - the accident of means is assumed within the bargain.

**ANNE**

You see. You're doing it even now. However much you wish to set your heroes lives in Ephesus or Rome, it's Stratford lanes your bold bravados trod. Your kin and kind, our every neighbor's face is etched in your blank verses.

**WILL**

I first had such a thought locked in a pitch black hole. Yet you have found it reading me?

**ANNE**

What hole?

**WILL**

A dungeon, just a night. A strange experience, newly of denial. I was locked in. And then your note, and I'm locked out.

**ANNE**

How like a child to find a tantrum in denial.

There is commotion in the next room.

**ANNE (CONT'D)**

O Will, I can not feed the King's Men at this hour.

**WILL**

Nay, we're paid for Lincoln all this week.

**ANNE**

So you'll be going back come daylight?

**WILL**

Not so soon, unless....

**JUDITH (O.S.)**

No. Papa!

Pushing Judith, aside, two **EARLSMEN**, wearing Southhampton's livery. burst in.

**EARLSMAN**

Master Shakespeare,  
You will come with us.

**JUDITH**

I tried to...

**ANNE**

Who's this?

**WILL**

You are Southhampton's men.

They grabs a hold of Will and lead him out.

**EARLSMAN**

You were advised to keep  
to London, sir.

**WILL**

Please, tell the Earl, that  
I'll return anon.

**EARLSMAN**

An earl's advice is an  
uppity gentleman-poser's  
bound command.

**ANNE**

Judith, call the watch!

**WILL**

No, Judith. Leave my fate to me.

The Earlsmen lead him off. Anne comforts  
Judith.

## SCENE 15 - SOUTHAMPTON HOUSE, THE STRAND.

Huge portrait of the Earl's Mother and Father  
dominate a large room with a 6-foot  
candelabra.

**EARLSMAN**

In he buttery.

**EARL**

Problems?

**EARLSMAN**

A struggle, but no trouble.

**EARL**

Unhurt, I hope? (off the Earlsman's nod) Why so long?

**EARLSMAN**

Stratford's three days out and three days back, milord.

**EARL**

You chased him to his home?

**EARLSMAN**

Followed him, your grace. Oxford, Coventry, Stratford, Chapel Lane,

**EARL**

What is it like?

**EARLSMAN**

Big house, very grand and all for a market town. Plain woman, spoke like a wife, but older. Pretty daughter. Saucy mouth.

**EARL**

Bring him.

The **EARLSMAN** exits.

**EARL**

(reading a sonnet)

"A woman's face with nature's own hand painted,  
Hast thou, the (shocked) master mistress(?) of my passion;  
A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted...  
A man in hue all 'hues' in his controlling,  
Which steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth.  
And for a woman wert thou first created...

Shakespeare is led in.

**EARL**

I never thought it'd come to this.

**WILL**

(controls his irritation)

What's this to which your "never thought" now seems to've come?

The Earl starts to throw the sonnets at Will,  
but controls himself in front of his man.

**EARL**

(to the Earlsman)

What did you tell him?

**EARLSMAN**

Din't know nothing to tell, then, did I, m'lord?

**WILL**

"Uppity gentleman poser" he called me, and worse amongst his co-conspirators. That got 'im gales of laughter.

Irritated, the Earl waves away the Earlsman,  
who goes off, grumbling.

**EARL**

Sorry. I felt I had to,  
for your own... What matters  
now is saving you.

**WILL**

How else could you be? Or I?  
A very sorry situation. Why?

**WILL**

Saving me? My life?

**EARL**

(startled)

I'd never let it come to that. It's your work that's in grave danger.

**WILL**

From you?

**EARLS**

The Bishop first. Now the King. Your reputation.

**WILL**

That which does not benefit another, but is all to me. From just what is it I need saving, besides the idle games of the privileged, ye who play at betters with we poor mis-begotten.

**EARL**

(how to say it)

The King is mad offended.

**WILL**

By what?

The Earl tosses the sonnets to Will who considers the blank cover before opening it.

**EARL**

Your heart upon a page. My youth in ink.

Will opens the book, and looking through it, slowly becomes furious.

**WILL**

No, no. No, no, no, no, no.

**EARL**

Our "bond," for all to gaggle on.

**WILL**

The Bishop's had my copy 18 months, to guarantee no printings.

**EARL**

You expect me to believe  
you had no hand in it?  
(checks title page) To earn  
another pound to passify  
your Stratford shrew.

**WILL**

Printed...  
for Tom Thorp?  
That diseased and  
indigestible lump?

**WILL**

Some us of stand fast (perusing the book) even when the wind blows North by Northwest. Dedicated to Master W.H. Know any W.H., milord?

**EARL**

William Herbert, 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Pembroke, and seven years my junior.

**WILL**

How often in my presence did your mother call you Master W.H., instructing you to (mimicking) "put your family - name and honor, son - before yourself." Then brayed your brash she-wolf. "Must I insist the servants call you Master Wroithesley Henry rather than milord - (shows the page) Master W.H. - to teach you loyalty and noblesse oblige?"

**EARL**

And so (grabs the book) this poet...

**WILL**

Once much beloved.

**EARL**

Writes "master-mistress" with his bold and unabash'ed pen. How does a country bumpkins write of a lord with such offense?

**WILL**

Better by far then "bed-boy." It was our joke. You loved the dress.

The Earl scoffs.

**WILL**

How can you, Harry, treat  
your once "so much beloved"  
poet with such hauteur'd hate?

**EARL**

Harry?  
You crude arrogant lout!

**EARL**

Where comes the gall to speak to an Earl with this familiarity?

**WILL**

From you. On your bed. May 1, 1591, a Wednesday, I think.

**EARL**

Sleeping off a drunken revel, nothing more.

**WILL**

You said such formality was not for a poet to his muse.

**EARL**

You are no longer my poet.

**WILL**

(heartfelt, moves to recapture a long gone bond)

God help me, sir, you were my muse, and are so even now.

**EARL**

I reminded you often you would never be my equal, no matter how many coats of arms I might buy you.

**WILL**

Yes, but that in my bed, a week later, and you had under slept.

**EARL**

You will always be common.

**WILL**

We're all common, pup, we just play in different pantaloons. More than your crests can be had for gold. The world's a-changing. Gold will buy a throne for a gamesman soon enough and make an oiler merchant head of state. It is my art that equals me to you. I gave you an eternity in these. Would you could ever give me half as much.

**EARL**

I gave you a thousand pounds to buy your way into the Globe and made you, and your rabble, King's Men's, that's how your eternity was made. I winked your father's coat of arms into the annals of gentility, proud son of a destitute glover that you are. Give you half as much? You nouveau riche have all become so, begging old money from your betters. Such was the price of this "eternal" fame.

**WILL**

True love is fraught with mutual usage. (a realization) There was only ever two clean copies. I had one, and you, milord, the other.

**EARL**

I also have enemies.

Knowing exchange of glances.

**WILL**

Whose thrust at you wounds only me.

**EARL**

Would that were so. The Bishop's shown this to the king. Sir Francis Bacon says the king now rants with rank embarrassment.

**WILL**

A king who diddles his own cod piece in public viewing and nibbles his catamite's ear whilst preaching 'gainst the sins of sodomy? What in these could embarrass such a man?

The Earl picks up the book and pages through it. The Earlsman appears, signaling to the Earl who moves to hear the message whispered in his ear.

**EARL**

Not in himself, but in the eyes and attitudes of councilors, his continental embassies, and such as hold the purse strings James needs loosened.

**WILL**

For his profligate divinity? O such craven eyes and attitudes by which you live.

**EARL**

And now the Bishop causes him to doubt that you could be true author of these poems or any your plays.

**WILL**

So, if I am the author, I'm a pervert and he's embarrassed? But if I'm not the author I'm... what?

**EARL**

According to the bishop...?

Lights up across the stage, on...

## SCENE 16 - THE KING'S PRIVY CHAMBER, WHITEHALL

The King is being fitted by a **HABERDASHER** for new clothes, offered choices of colors, material, ruffs, and ruffles, jewels, etc. The Sexton uncomfortably tries to hold the king's attention as he proffers depositions which Carr gathers. Bacon and the anxious Bishop watch.

**BISHOP**

An atheist and a traitor!

**SEXTON**

An "actor!" Testimony from the Bishop of Ely: (reading) "These players mock their betters with fine speeches and sharp lies, and put shrill words into the mouth of history. How can he know the words empiric pagan Caesar spoke? A king should not allow a poet to be so political."

**BACON**

Every word in all these plays upholds the authority of the throne.

**SEXTON**

But questions the men who sit upon it.

**BACON**

His histories and tragedies invariably end with the monarchy intact or restored, as savior of the people. They are obedient to god's order and degree, confident with faith in the right to rule of an anointed sovereign. They are conformity itself.

**SEXTON**

Read closer, milord, you will smell the stench of treason. Every scene dissects nobility and anatomizes the monarchy, asking how come this not that one wears the crown. He gets the groundlings doubting.

**BISHOP**

Master of the Revels' full report, sire, riots from the theaters spilling out into the street, the idle 'gainst good order.

The King signals for the Earl to enter.

**BACON**

(slyly into the king's ear)

I should point out that in your Parliament, your majesty, your bishops hold the balance of the power.

**KING**

(turns coldly to the Bishop)

You wouldn't vote against the crown, would you, your eminence?

**BISHOP**

(taken aback by such directness)

Our interests are your own, sire. Indeed, the church is... yours.

**KING**

I am glad.

**BISHOP**

We seek the stability of the state, in the divinity of the king.

**KING**

Very reassuring.

**SEXTON**

Either Shakespeare is a fool who unwittingly agreed to put his name on the works of an obviously better-educated, highly-positioned leader of a court faction bent on destroying the monarchy...

**BACON**

Or?

**SEXTON**

If he has against all likelihood produced these works himself, it can only mean he is...

**EARL**

He is a gentleman, sire.

**SEXTON**

Because he bought himself a coat of arms?

**KING**

Bought?

**SEXTON**

With the earl's money, was it not, your grace?

**KING**

(exploding)

'Sblood, Harry, you bad me make him groom of the royal chamber!

**BISHOP**

(to the Earl)

So I have been assured by the current Garter King-of-Arms.

**CARR**

Good Sexton. Is any effort being made to find the poet true, as much as to prove him false?

A stunned silence, abruptly ended by.

**SEXTON**

I can get the name of the noble youth of these sick sonnets, but the player is a member of your household, sire. I need a royal warrant.

**KING**

Indeed. A warrant? (turns to the Bishop) Milord?

**BACON**

He must be arrested, first, and charged.

**KING**

Arrested?

**CARR**

Isn't it possible the rumors are but a rival's jealousy?

**BISHOP**

No.

**SEXTON**

There is sedition in this work, written by a godless heretic, subversive of your church - and he's a papist, sire, I'm sure of it!

**KING****SEXTON**

(to Earl, astounded)

And now a charge of popery?! If only I'm allowed to question him.  
Another conspiracy? This more insidious than the **EARL**  
Gunpowder Plot? Am I again Will Shakespeare makes it his  
to save the nation? business to stay away from politics.

**BISHOP**

You should read 'Will's' plays, sirrah.

**EARL**

I have.

**SEXTON**

Have you?

**KING**

We are reading them now, aren't we, Robin?

**CARR**

(to the haberdasher)

The scarlet, I think.

**SEXTON****HABERDASHER**

Sire!

But, sir. (to the King) Sire, it  
offends the palette of colors.

**KING**

If I'm to walk amidst the gawkers and the gapers, I want them to  
know where to look. I'll not be going amongst them soon again.

**BISHOP**

(pressing on)

Sir Francis haven't you suggested often times that we make too much  
of Shakespeare on state occasions?

**BACON**

The king's poet impresses Europe and brings glory to the crown.

**SEXTON**

Does he?

**CARR**

Pardon me. Is it usual in England for the clergy to have such voice  
in politics?

**SEXTON**

You Scots will learn that in a land where the king is head of  
church, all doctrine, sir, is politics.

**BISHOP**

I'm told the queen's brother will be with us come Christmastide?

**KING**

He will. Remind me that, Robin,

**BISHOP**

The king of Denmark is a papist.

**KING**

As is his sister. My wife! A suit of gold for then, haberdasher?

**HABERDASHER**

Aye, my lord.

**KING**

Gentlemen, I cannot be the Light of Europe if I limit my diplomacy  
to Protestants?

**BISHOP**

Even the slightest question about the dignity of your majesty of...

**KING**

Does anyone question my majesty?

**SEXTON**

London is a den of spies, sire.

**BISHOP**

There is evidence a court faction speaks against you and your  
fitness as king.

**KING**

Fitness? What is he saying, Francis?

**BACON**

He's saying you'd be handing your enemies a dagger. What he's  
suggesting, sire, is a scandal that would allow Parliament to refuse  
you the funds you so desperately need.

**SEXTON**

If the King of Denmark were  
to learn that a play set  
in his own court, which  
tells the tale of a royal Prince  
who kills his anointed king,  
was penned by a rebellious  
member of your court?

KING

(about something in the Bible)

What?

But it's a pla...

**CARR**

Sir Francis, is there a rebel in the king's court?

**SEXTON**

Many are envious of a Scot wearing the English crown.

**CARR**

Can you give us the name of this high Saxon rebel!

**EARL**

Gentlemen, the immediate issue is to halt the distribution of these sonnets. Who or what is hidden behind can wait.

**BISHOP**

No, your grace. The players must be stopped, now. The Theaters must be closed, permanently.

**BACON**

To what end?

**SEXTON**

Securing the state. Saving the king.

**EARL**

I guarantee you, sire, this poet is no threat to you.

**SEXTON**

Only the youth of the sonnets could give such a guarantee. Were you the lover?

**CARR**

(jumping in, abruptly)

Your wife is your lover, is she not, your grace?

**EARL**

She is.

**KING**

I'll not be made a fool of Harry. Suddenly, this man does seem... either way, whatever the truth... a threat.

**EARL**

What can a poet do to a king?

**BACON**

Tell the truth.

**BISHOP**

He'd not be the first player found to be a traitor, sire.

**CARR**

He's not been found guilty yet, I think.

**SEXTON**

He will be when I've had him on the rack.

**CARR**

I say again, milords, has no one even sought out evidence the man is innocent?

**BISHOP**

There's nothing innocent about a man who would hold a knife to a Bishop's throat.

**KING**

He did that?

**EARL**

You go too far, milord bishop.

**BISHOP**

I feel the blade even now.

**SEXTON**

If you would sign this warrant for his arrest.

The King wavers.

**EARL**

You don't have to. I have him.

They have to digest that.

**KING**

Where?

**EARL**

Under guard at Southampton House.

**KING**

On whose order?

**EARL**

In anticipation of yours, your majesty. And this.

A tense moment.

**KING**

Lock him in the Tower!

**SEXTON**

I will report every word he...

**KING**

I'll get the truth of him.

**CARR**

His majesty is greatly skilled at getting answers.

**EARL**

The Tower, your majesty?

**KING**

I've experience at cross-questioning.

**BISHOP**

The Sexton will acquaint you, sire, with the all details related to the poet's "master-mistress..."

All exit but the Haberdasher, left holding his taffeta. The Earl returns to...

**SCENE 17 - SOUTHAMPTON HOUSE, HOURS LATER.**

Will is writing and eating. The Earl picks up the sonnets and reads.

**EARL**

How could you write of me in such extravagant words?

**WILL**

My heart flowed off the  
new swan's quill you'd  
given me. I came from  
nothing and had nothing,  
until I saw in your eyes  
the king that you awakened  
deep inside a glover's son.

**EARL**

Or about yourself.

It is humiliating.

**EARL**

Why do you say such things?

**WILL**

I feel such things.

**EARL**

But... write...? For everyone to read?

**WILL**

I am a poet. Once that's what you loved in me. Was that all you loved? We've never found the time or need to puzzle that one out. Perhaps the time has come.

**EARL**

Not till I've finished reading them.

**WILL**

You've heard them all. By the lake. In your secret cave, your 21<sup>st</sup> birthday when it rained. In your eighteenth in the garden...

**EARL**

Please.

**WILL**

In your bed the hiding in the quilts against that cold winter morning your mother nearly...

**EARL**

These were different then.

**WILL**

A word or phrase, altered, here or there, but not the sense of them. How could I? (re: the book) This is what it was like.

**EARL**

They sounded different to my ear.

**WILL**

A younger ear. I know you still remember how it felt lost in love, yet now you want the words to sound like something less than true.

**EARL**

They are open to such misinterpretation.

**WILL**

They always were. As was our love.

**EARL**

And all together! So many in a single volume. You never spoke of "her" so maddeningly, and never then accused me of... of betrayal! In this context, Will, they make too much of... us!

**WILL**

Are you ashamed?

**EARL**

Aren't you?

**WILL**

Not for a heartbeat. Weren't we in love?

**EARL**

We couldn't have been. Not like that.

**WILL**

Couldn't we have been? However innocent, however naive looking back it may appear...

**EARL**

It was new joy.

**WILL**

...it was too powerful then to ever be denied. At least by me.

**EARL**

All childishness.

**WILL**

Innocent, honest, unvarnished, unsoiled with rank, degree or expectation.

**EARL**

That's what I loved, then.

**WILL**

Indeed.

**EARL**

But Will, to publish these. Like this. I am betrayed.

**WILL**

And I. I'd no idea. You think I'd want this foul crude version of my loves and losses to be slathered over by the world in all its slips and tatters?

**EARL**

Then you won't mind them being suppressed.

**WILL**

Suppressed. (seeing the Earl's actions anew) And when they've all been burnt, what then of me? (realizing) The King will demand the name of my fair friend, my golden youth, aye? And our mutual mistress?

**EARL**

And you'll plead innocent fiction.

**WILL**

I'll not deny you, Harry. Nor our love. Not thrice, nor twice, not even once. Not "If I should despair, or should grow mad," E'en "in my madness" I'd "not speak ill of thee." I had a passion for you so ferocious it near choked me. You once were everything I dreamed of - beauty, rank, and opportunity - I felt a god in your embrace.

**EARL**

A friendly hug.

**WILL**

Another past re-wrought. It was for both the lust of life, the naked treasuring of existence, until, I found, you'd lost the palpable divinity you'd bred in me. Now you're just a wonder of a man, no more a godling. But now I breed my own divinity - here in the imaginative depth of mine own soul. I never loved my wife with such untamed and knowing passion. For you the hunger's gone, but love still smolders here, and here, and won't be banked but by the last small clod of the icy earth you will one day shovel on my grave.

The Earl is emotionally moved, and tries to force himself to speak. He can't. He signals to his man, who moves to chain Will.

**WILL (CONT'D)**

You're going to let this happen?

**EARL**

I have no choice.

**WILL**

Are you so scared, you need me locked in the Tower?

**EARL**

Deny the sonnets. I'll go to the king...

**WILL**

Deny your wife and children, deny your schemes and plots, and still you'd live a life of ease and wonder. Deny my poetry? What am I but my words? What have I else?

**EARL**

What have I?

**WILL**

Everything you ever wanted, except - if you do this - me!

**EARL**

I never wanted you.

**WILL**

Then how could I have written those sonnets? Read them. You think there could ever have been Romeo or Hamlet without you?

**EARL**

But we did nothing!

**WILL**

It's not what we did. It's what we felt and what we meant to each other. Deny it to the world, you can't to me. It's written out, and now it's printed. Even in their crude state, I'm at peace.

**EARL**

And I am ruined.

**WILL**

You're not. You're only forced to choose between expedience and honor. Once, you nearly got my head hacked off insisting I play a part in Essex's aborted rebellion against the queen.

**EARL**

'Twas fair repayment

**WILL**

Of your prideful generosity. Wasn't that enough? Believe in James or believe in... what those sonnets say of us.

**EARL**

You're a fine one to talk to me of belief. I'm going to destroy your sonnets. Every last copy of them.

**WILL**

Eat the paper, tear the pages, the poetry's immortal. Harry, would you rob me of my heart?

**EARL**

It seems my once upon a timeless poet made a dream I can no longer live in. I will shut away the poet, still his voice, slice up his swan's quill pens, if I must.

Unable to endure Will's gaze, the Earl exits.

**WILL**

Then so you must.

Will cannot hold back; he weeps.

**BLACKOUT**

## ACT FOUR

## SCENE 1 - CELL, TOWER OF LONDON

Dark Stone walls, one high elongated-cross window, an alcove bed. It's the storage room for the Tower's memorabilia: Essex's boots, Anne Boleyn's axe, wooden swords of two smothered Princes, King John's torture rack, huge mirrors, tall candle sticks, junk remains of offending souls. A soft moaning wind can be heard. A dim light off left.

## GAOLER (O.S.)

Since last I took the charge o'you, sir, as y'see, I'm made turnkey o'this the King's Bloody Tower...

The GAOLER, speaking over his shoulder, enters with a lit candle and others in his arms.

## GAOLER

Don't know how, don't know why. Last Lamastide, the Captain of the Clink comes o' me and says...

Will follows the Gaoler on. He connects Will's chains to the bars, and unlocks the cell.

## GAOLER (CONT'D)

"Horvald," says he, "the king's called ye to London's Tower." Give me a scare, it did. Told old Tits I must've done some horrid thing. The Tower! Nawp! Blessings of god. Tits 'n' me, we got two big rooms, now. (peers into the cell, wary) Only down this here wing thrice afore. Better sort's at t'other end, 'cept the guest of honor. Best wait here.

## WILL

Think I'd run off, brave Oberon?

## GAOLER

Can't, now, can ye. Nawp. And it's Horvald, here, 'f'i' please ye.

Sniffing the air, the Gaoler lights candles, drips wax in spots and plants them around.

## GAOLER (CONT'D)

Blood o'Jesus, was I warned! (looks around now that there's light) Ghosties thick as thieves and halven-witches. Get no peace with this lot.

## WILL

Ghosts and halven-witches?  
Spirits don't bother me;  
the dampness does.

## GAOLER

Just gimme a minute  
I'll clear 'em.

The Gaoler grabs a broom from near the door.

## GAOLER

(looks at Will in disbelief, then decides to ignore his attitude)  
Didn't expect to see you in a cell again so soon, Master Shakespeare. What offense, this time, eh?

**WILL**

Crime of poetry.

**GAOLER**

Crime now, is it?

**WILL**

And playmaking.

**GAOLER**

Gotcha there. Everyone's got a critic in 'em, so they say?

**WILL**

Get a lot of complaints, do you?

**GAOLER**

You've no idea how rude them betters be 'bout drippy cells, smelly coverlets, whips that come unraveled and such.

**WILL**

Who would these betters be?

**GAOLER**

The very High and Mighty King hisself, James Stuart, Sixth of Scotland - wilderness of ruffians, that, f'y'ask me. And now he's Jamie First of all we Englishmen, more's the pity. Stumbles round here drunk most nights.

**WILL**

The king comes here?

**GAOLER**

Clutching his new bible last few weeks. Protection, so he says, 'gainst the ghosties. Midnight last, he's drunk, and ffft! He's down! Had to hold him up till's pretty boy come fetch 'em. (ducks) See that'n? (a spirit passes through him; laughs heartily, then stops) WOOSH!

A breeze rustles the Gaoler's hair, lifts  
Will's cloak. Shadows scurry out of the  
Gaoler's way. Hushed whispers are heard.

**GAOLER (CONT'D)**

Go on, shoo! O, milady. (to will) Ye see, ye see? First hour I come, they gimme keys and warned me, "Here's the keys for Bloody Tower. New one's always start there. And best be wary, more lost souls in Bloody Tower 'n any other inside the precinct wall." First time I come in here I believed it. Spirits seem to congregate-like here. Like as not to see the Ghost of Essex 'round midnight, his head tucked right up under his arm. Awp! (picks up a helmet) Must've lost his Burgonet.

**WILL**

That's the crest of Norfolk, not Essex.

**GAOLER**

Knew 'im, did ye? Well, bold Essex were my general for Ireland. Run off and left us all to rot to come back and make rebellion 'gainst Old Bess. Awp! (shooing spirits) Off the bed! Gawd a'mighty! Them witches' busy busy. Setting something dark.

He unlocks Will, and prods him to go in.

**GAOLER (CONT'D)**

Not to worry. All them's what are put in the charge o' yours truly're guaranteed safe. Never lost a prisoner, not I. Gimme a bad name if harm was to come to my first new charge, eh?

**WILL**

Good to know I'm under the care of Oberon. Have you a coverlet?

**GAOLER**

I did tell ye, sir, "Oberon's" a private thing and not for ears round here. You're the groundling in Bloody Tower. My stage, this.

The Gaoler goes off for a blanket leaving the door open. Will looks to escape, but...

The Gaoler re-enters with and bedding. He looks around, eyes Will, shakes his head ("No escaping, me, sir"). He throws him a coverlet and shakes a "naughty" finger at him.

**GAOLER (CONT'D)**

Ah ah! Now, I'm told these here spirits can get bothersome long about dawn - nothing dangerous, mind ye. Just a howl and a moan. Pull the coverlet up over your ears. Come the sunrise, they be off.

**WILL**

You a student of demonology?

**GAOLER**

Me, sir? Student? I got no edikashun. I know no more than tids and bits of anything.

The Gaoler exits, locking the door.

**WILL**

Ah. (cough) These spirits, O timorous Oberon, are but the monstrous fears of your superstitious soul. (to himself) Gargoyled guilts caught in the lashes of your gullible mind's eye.

The Gaoler enters with a piss-pot.

**GAOLER**

I'm a god-fearing man, and you've no cause to say me otherwise.

**WILL**

(grabs the pot and turns away for a much needed piss)

Ahhhh!

**GAOLER**

My fair Titania warned me ye'd be saying strange poetical things. Pay 'im no mind says she.

**WILL**

Heard much? About me being in here?

**GAOLER**

Hear a lot. Don't understand much.

**WILL**

No need to understand, just repeat the words.

**GAOLER**

Heard "fraud"... and, "unedikated," lots of that, (chuckling) 'bout you. So they say.

Will holds out the piss pot.

**WOMAN (O.S.)**

Will?

**GAOLER**

Who calls?

A dark cloaked and hooded figure appears,  
holding the single candle follows.

**MARGARET**

(snidely) The Dark Lady,  
from your sonnets, black  
eyes, dun breasts, black  
wire on my head.

**WILL**

Jesus wept!

Don't let her in.

**GAOLER**

Sounds t'me, you've conjured up a halven-witch. I did warn you.

**MARGARET**, 40-ish, stands at the door, shaking  
her head at Will.

**MARGARET**

You are a cunny licking  
traitor to the good  
old days, you are.

**WILL**

(to the Gaoler)

Did you?

The Gaoler opens the cell, with his hand out.

**GAOLER**

Mistress Bedwarm, I presume.

Margaret gets a coin from Will's doublet,  
gives it to the Gaoler, and grabs the candle.

**GAOLER**

One hour. No more.

**MARGARET**

Don't be stingy, turnkey.

The Gaoler exits sniggering. Margaret gets a  
paper from her dress and lays it on the table.

**GAOLER**

Take him to bed, now, eh? Save the candle.

**MARGARET**

Good night, kind turnkey.  
Sign here. A deposition.

**WILL**

What's this?  
Sign what?

**MARGARET (CONT'D)**

I need your surety that I am not this Dark Lady you've so  
passionately and cruelly cursed on in your sappy sonnet book.

**MARGARET (CONT'D)**

If my husband ever finds  
someone to read these imagine  
sonnets to him, I'll lose me  
grand good home. Maybe I can't  
read. But I know those that  
can. And they come telling  
me, didn't they? And so I  
come to you.

**WILL**

Dark Lady? You? How could you  
even think such a thing?  
How do you know what they  
say of my 'Dark Lady?' you call  
her? I wrote those years ago,  
Marge. Well, most of them.  
You were still a virginal  
slip of a girl when...

**MARGARET (CONT'D)**

(hands him the quill)

Course I was. So, put your mark to it. Swear by god's own grace,  
that I am not your dark and ugly whore.

**WILL**

(considers the request)

My dark haired Lady? You? No. I'll swear to nothing. Not about this.

**MARGARET**

Then may you freeze through the night. In the dark. Turnkey!

She snuffs out the candles, and marches to the cell door.

**WILL**

He's gone to his bed. So come you here to mine and let me sooth your anxious heart.

**MARGARET**

Fuck you.

**WILL**

If that's what you've come for? Happily.

**MARGARET**

I know you Will Shakespeare for the whorson adulterer you are. It's not my heart you wish to sooth.

**WILL**

I know how limp a cuckold your lost husband is. You've come for a good long poetic fuck. And I will give it as you wish.

He blows out the candle.

**SCENE 2 - KING'S PLACE, HACKNEY, THE LIBRARY**

And anxious Sexton is handing Elizabeth, the Dowager Countess of Oxford, **LADY DE VERE**, mid-40's, a copy of the Sonnets.

**SEXTON**

It is suggested that a desperate widow hoping for improvement in her means, might have some insight into the true author's identity.

**LADY DE VERE**

An improvement in her family's fortune. From the king? For an "insight" into th'imagination from which these poems sprang.

**SEXTON**

It is rumored they're beyond his education... and his rank.

**LADY DE VERE**

But not, beyond... (grasps the Sexton's purpose) my husband's. Could these have come from my husband's pen. Certainly the learning matches his.

The Sexton hands her play scripts then takes up paper and quill. He writes what will be a deposition. Lady de Vere peruses the plays.

**SEXTON**

Hardly the scribblings of a Stratford rustic.

**LADY DE VERE**

Intricately worded... requiring the labor of a well-read man... who would spend his wife's inheritance on a vast library...

**SEXTON**

Who'd not besmirch his rank and honor to have his theatricals sent into the world with his name attached.

**LADY DE VERE**

No, he would not.

The Sexton adds her comments to his writing.

**SEXTON**

As the king assured me.

**LADY DE VERE**

(looks up, sensing a problem)

The 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford's five years dead, sir. Yet these are printed but a fortnight since, and many of these long since.

The Sexton stops to consider this new wrinkle.

**SEXTON**

Printed, aye, but written, who knows when?

Lady de Vere reads the deposition. A FOOTMAN enters and whispers to her.

**LADY DE VERE**

The Earl of Southhampton

**SEXTON**

Here?

He hands her the quill. She takes it.

**LADY DE VERE**

Within the hour. Go now.

The Sexton reaches for the deposition. She holds on to it.

**LADY DE VERE (CONT'D)**

I will read it over. Good night.

Thwarted, he goes with one last warning look.

### SCENE 3 - CELL, TOWER OF LONDON

Dark. Will and Margaret asleep.

**KING (O.S.)**

Open up, Gaoler!

**GAOLER (O.S.)**

The King?

**MARGARET**

Oh, dear God!

**GAOLER**

Aye, milord.

The Gaoler opens the door. The King, drunk, enters with a bible. Carr carries a bottle of wine and a full goblet from which the king repeatedly sips.

**KING**

Get her out of here.

**CARR**

And, turnkey, bring a logs.

**GAOLER**

Right away, milord.

**KING**

Out!

The Gaoler leads Margaret out. She gets the deposition and curtsies as she passes.

**KING**

I canna fucking sleep, and when I canna fucking sleep we watch the moon and wonder. So doing, we've hit upon a proof.

**CARR**

Your doing, your majesty, entirely.

**WILL**

I take this opportunity to thank you for this humble lodging, sire.

**KING**

Poet, you are an impertinent rogue. But I think I like that. (starts to speak, changes his mind and takes a different tack) The Bishop's weasel has a deposition from Harry's own father - Harry Wroithesley. the Earl of Southampton.

**WILL**

Stepfather, sire.

**KING**

(looks around to Carr who nods; shrugs)  
Stepfather.

**CARR**

Tell him what it's about, Jemmy.

**KING**

Unfortunately, the Earl's stepfather has gleefully composed a damning tale he says the Earl's late mother told before she died. A highly embellished ornately conceived anecdote.

**CARR**

You and the Earl frolicking in the gardens of Southampton alone the night of his eighteenth birthday.

**KING**

Naked.

**WILL**

Frolicking is not a sin, milord.

**CARR**

In the mouth of the Bishop's cur it is.

**KING**

You and I, my proud poet, are wise enough to know the needs of the heart of gifted men. But my bishop,

**CARR**

He wants you out of your theater.

**KING**

And out of his, too, you must know.

**CARR**

His Sexton's gathering evidence...

**KING**

To prove you are my playwright, as I have told the world.

**WILL**

Good thinking.

**KING**

I'm trying to be fucking charming, Shakespeare.

**WILL**

(almost to himself)

I fucking hope so.

The King stares disbelievingly; Will glances up; quickly they're chuckling at each other. The King starts to offer his wine, but thinks better of it.

**WILL (CONT'D)**

But, sire, I'm on display five afternoons a week, plague not withstanding. My name's on many a quarto of my plays.

**KING**

Aye, the name, just so.

**CARR**

But what proof you did the writing?

**WILL**

Did the King write his own "Daemonologie?" What "proof" can there be?

**CARR**

That's not helping, Master Shakespeare.

The Gaoler enters with logs and sets a fire.

**KING**

God spoke the answer to that very question. To me!

The King drinks. Carr drinks. Will waits while they finish giggling at their own cleverness.

**KING CONT'D)**

I'll have you write me a fucking play.

**WILL**

I've written three dozen. I'll have one delivered tomorrow.

**CARR**

A new play.

**WILL**

I have the beginnings of three on my desk. With a warm fire and a large pot of ink, I'll read you a new one in a month.

**KING**

Sooner. I want this over before the new parliament.

**CARR**

A week at most.

**KING**

And on a theme of my devising.

**WILL**

I don't write themes, milord.

**CARR**

And in here.

**KING**

A bonnie solution, eh?

**CARR**

A bold defense.

**WILL**

What do you mean, here?

**CARR**

What would it prove, you let out, free to dust off an old script and dress it up.

**KING**

More to the Sexton's accusation, get ye another from whomever it is he says you've had writing the plays you're accused of stealing.

**WILL**

The Bishop and this Sexton(!) accuse me of thieving poetry? It's like Pontius Pilot accusing Christ of stealing his own cross.

**KING**

That sounds dangerously close to fucking blasphemy. But I'm too drunk to parse it out.

**CARR**

Surely, you can see, Master Shakespeare, nothing's gained if you offer up another stolen script as proof of your authorship?

**KING**

I'll have a new play of ye, damn it, written here in my Bloody Tower.

**WILL**

A week? In here?

**KING**

You are my poet, a groom of my privy chamber. You write my plays for me for which service I pay you handsomely. So, to work. (to the Gaoler) This man is allowed the garden, under your constant eye, three hours a day, no more. Feed him according to Tower fare. His friends may bring him blankets and clothes and whatever else he may require but no scripts. (to the Will) Mark you, all that's said he will report to me. I'll have no friend dictate this new drama. Gaoler? Wait upon his needs at every minute.

**WILL**

Your majesty, I...

**CARR**

The Bishop says his Sexton's found proof the plays that bear your name were penned by Edward de Vere, late Earl of Oxford.

**WILL**

From his grave? Will the bishop bring his tombstone into court?

**KING**

Perhaps he'll bring one for you.

**CARR**

You said a theme, you majesty?

**KING**

Aye, eh, my best conception: kings and their rights divine. The holy labors of kingwork.

**WILL**

But, sire, there's a law, your new law forbidding the presentation of any living high born person on the stage. Especially, the king.

**KING**

I am the law.

**WILL**

It is, I fear, a dangerous undertaking even with the king's permission.

**KING**

I command it.

**CARR**

But, Jemmy, the man is...

**KING**

Quiet, boy!

**WILL**

Were you to be taken ill and die, pray not, your majesty, or perhaps, god forbid, assassinated.

**CARR**

Master Shakespeare!

**WILL**

If such a script by me were found, how would I prove the illegal work was writ by royal command?

**KING**

Turnkey! Paper and ink.

**GAOLER**

Aye, majesty.

The Gaoler looks for the paper and pen.

**KING**

I off to Hampton Court, back the 21st. I'll have then, before the parliament next reconvenes.

**WILL**

Sire, tragedy requires more than a week.

**CARR**

Not this one.

**KING**

I will not have it rumored my royal poet's a man who puts his name on another's work. I exalt your plays to the crowns of Europe. I gift them quartos of our works. Aside from going on a hunt, my plays are my only...

The Gaoler hands Carr the ink and a quill, smoothing out a piece of foolscap he'd wrinkled. The King takes it and writes.

**KING (CONT'D)**

How should I seem, praising a yeoman from some dusty rural market town, as my most illustrious subject, and come to find he's a fraud, a thief?! I on the throne of Britain, directing its glories, and all the while some counterfeit's eviscerating the foibles of my predecessors, making mock of monarchy. (holds out the warrant) If I am martyred show this. Please your king, or pay the price! Prove we are great in poetry!

**WILL**

(reading the warrant)

It is somewhat limited, my liege.

**KING**

Limited? (looks at the warrant) Ah. (scratches out some words and writes others) There.

Will takes the pen and writes other words, then hands it to the King. Not looking, the King signs the warrant then flings it at Will.

**KING**

I'll not be played for a fool, Master Shakespeare.

Again, the King leads Carr to the door.

**WILL**

No, sire. A new tragedy, the divine rights of a king, but one week?

**KING**

Surely you can write a thousand lines in a week. I myself have written more in less. And yours are shorter lines. I'll visit time to time, to read your pages.

**CARR**

Sire, your bible.

**KING**

My bible? Indeed. (an idea) Indeed, Robin, just the thing.

The King directs Carr to hand Will the Bible.

**KING (CONT'D)**

Find your inspiration in there, but do not fail to write me a god of wonder, and a king of great power, both to awe the people.

Once again, the King and Carr start to go.

**CARR**

Good night.

**WILL**

A god, sirrah? Now I'm to bring god on the stage?

**KING**

I have inspired myself. Write me a play of Lord Jesus as King of Heaven appearing to an anointed king of earth. What does my poet imagine Jesus would say to me?

**WILL**

The thought is overpowering. But even more than living kings the law and the Church forbid the Lord Almighty being brought to the stage.

The irritated King grabs the warrant and writes in the margin, then hands it to Will.

**KING**

I know god's will, and I am king. Read my Bible.

The Gaoler unlocks the door. The King exits.  
Will opens the new Bible.

**SCENE 4 - LADY DE VERE'S BEDCHAMBER.**

Lady de Vere is returning a copy of the Sonnets to the Earl.

**LADY DE VERE**

Yes, I've heard. The Bishop rails against your Master Shakespeare. Players. (pages through) Nothing new about that.

**EARL**

Is there's a deposition? Your name on't? The poet is a fraud; he claims the work of a better man.

**LADY DE VERE**

That, too, I've heard.

**EARL**

Where?

**LADY DE VERE**

From an unimpeachable source, a man not even god would doubt. Edward de Vere, 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford, my husband, so I say.

**EARL**

Your husband, who's been in his grave now half a decade. I don't... (gets it) Yes. Well, madame, Before the late Earl took your hand...

**LADY DE VERE**

And my money. I heard  
it from his very lips.

**EARL**

You had a reputation... for honesty.

**EARL**

I know your late husband... for a creative liar, but not to claim a fame he didn't earn.

**LADY DE VERE**

He had no need of fame. He was content to hide his art behind that base-born rhymers who's grown rich in borrowed satins. The Earl of Oxford is a title not to be flaunted as "a motley to the world."

**EARL**

He didn't care about the world.

**LADY DE VERE**

He cared enough to lose my fortune enjoying it.

**EARL**

And so you've spawned this false rumor?

**LADY DE VERE**

I spawned nothing, but a new, now-nearly destitute 15 year old, 18th Earl.

**EARL**

Why now? Is it money you expect?

**LADY DE VERE**

I want my husband's legacy, your grace, and all its merit. What did you come here expecting?

**EARL**

That my friend, the 17th Earl of Oxford, gone, but a fond memory, had married a wife with half the honor he brought to his name. And hers.

**LADY DE VERE**

He got a wife with twice the devotion he deserved, and three times the fortune he never earned, but wantonly wasted.

**EARL**

Hardly a waste, milady. Edward was a patron of the arts, which was, he knew, the noblest use of wealth and title.

**LADY DE VERE**

How will I see his son gets what he'll need to indulge such noble uses, or indeed, survive, much less, deserve? The 18<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford's estate is a mountain of debt, burying his family fortune.

**EARL**

Don't be played for a fool, milady. For your son's interests, and yours, you must stay true to your husband's finer virtues. Don't let his shortcomings tarnish your son's... nobility. No matter what's been offered, to do otherwise is a trap. (hands her a warrant for money) I'll see the 18<sup>th</sup> Earl has means to enjoy the dignity his title accords, and you shall call this rumor what it is - a lie.

**LADY DE VERE**

What will happen to this loving book?

**EARL**

It is suppressed, (takes the sonnets) by order of the king. Good evening, madam.

The Earl exits. Lady de Vere holds it over a candle flame. The Footman enters.

**FOOTMAN**

The Sexton said you'd have a document you'd want me to take to him.

**LADY DE VERE**

He is a presumptuous weasel, is he not?

She holds the deposition over the flame.

**SCENE 5. WILL'S CELL IN THE TOWER OF LONDON**

Will paces, thinking, gets an idea, sits and warms his hands, then writes, hurriedly.

**WILL**

Burn slow, dim candle, please. (flame flickers) I prithee, please! (coughing) My eyes, too watery old, too used, For this! Another taper, keeper! (writes, furiously. The candle's flicker) I pray thee, god, do let it last but a short WHILE LONGER! (it goes out' pleadingly) Out? Not out, damn light. (stops, angry) Is there no light for a play on god?

Evidently a cloud blocking the moon glides off into the night. A strong beam of moonlight shines through the high narrow window.

He drags the table into the light and writes.

**WILL (CONT'D)**

Age is crueller to the eyes than heaven's moon.

The moon beams move across the cell. He drags the table to stay in the light and write.

**WILL (CONT'D)**

(mumbles)

Yea, in the b'ginning there was light and good it was until - it moved to block the...

There is a scratching on the cell door. Will goes to speak through the door.

**CARR**

Master Shakespeare.

**WILL**

Who's there?

**CARR**

Robin Carr. A word. The king does not believe i'the Bishop's cause nor any charge his fox has made against you.

**WILL**

He does not want to believe. That's not the same.

**CARR**

Would Lady Essex stand to your reputation?

**WILL**

Elizabeth? Aye. She has a gentle lady's honor. Why?

**CARR**

I've asked and I've been given leave to seek out evidence in your defense.

**WILL**

Sweet Lizzie? I have "known" her. Sir, why you?

**CARR**

I think you are as grossly used as I.

**WILL**

As grossly used as you, milord?

**CARR**

You by your foes who play on rivals' envy. I...

**WILL**

By the King.

**CARR**

(shocked Will understands)

Shhhh!

**WILL**

"Gross use" has gained you wealth and rank by favor.

**CARR**

Such favor has a royal bed tax I'm ashamed to pay. I seek an end of it.

**WILL**

What denouement would you construct?

**CARR**

What you?

**WILL**

If tragedy? Self-slaughter - quick and clean. If comedy, comeuppance. Which or what; the choices, many, flow from character.

**CARR**

And, from your tone, sir, you think I have none.

**WILL**

That is your anger's thought, not mine. Grow some. And meanwhile find a prettier bedpan to warm your willful king. He has more need of loyalty in his bed than pricking love.

**CARR**

He needs to be adored for all his vanities. He can not, he does not inspire love. He buys it.

**WILL**

Thus your drama.

**CARR**

Mine and yours. The cost of all his pleasures, you and I, depends on parliamentary funds and those upon the votes of noblemen and bishops. Good night, sir. "Give me your hands if we be friends, your Robin shall restore amends." (sotto voce from a distance) I love that one.

Carr is gone. Another cloud glides by, covers the moon. Will writes faster, moving with the light to the wall, then moving his paper up the wall trying to see. And then darkness.

**WILL**

Fucking clouds! (silence) This is a stillborn darkness in the mind. The foulest alleyways in London have less murk than this. I cannot see my hand! (silence) I know the feeling of a god compelled to make his own imperfect world to find some solace. He wants a play. Four hours of clashing poetry. This poetry, I come to see, has been my weapon in the wars for placement in the sun - my honor's in the ink, demanding an audacious devotion. He who would capture it, deface or destroy it, by slander or the sword, hath not found me silent, easy or willing. But now, this long war seems a mad caprice and am I aging weary into wariness. Why so, this moment? (a moonbeam slowly brightens) At last. I tried to hamlet Lear and earned a bitter Timon. A brutus'd MacBeth became cold Coriolanus. What pestilence of the soul gave me the need to seek theirs? How did I not know then the nasty me in these? Why not til now, in this foul dark apart? Alone, sans heat, sans sound, sans time; how will I populate my mind? I have but one un-us'ed role to write, the exiled alchemist accursed of air and earth with the fired waters of the tempest in my gut, bent on righting all the wrongs of rank and feeble power till my quill is broken and my last drop of ink, my soured blood spills out it anxious, growling, yearning, hopeful will. My seething brain, grapples with more devils than vast hell can hold, and gives strange forms to things unknown; imagined airy

nothings take on fearsome habitations, perceived by some trick fear.  
So easy is a bush suppos'd a bear.

## SCENE 6 - BEDCHAMBER, ESSEX HOUSE

**Lady Essex**, 19, in a dressing gown, enters  
with Robert Carr. She teasingly strips, using  
the sheets for cover.

### CARR

It has been said, the king asks, and he has said you know him.

### LADY ESSEX

Know him, Robin? (aroused, drops the sonnets and pulls Carr onto the bed with her) I loved him. (begins undressing him) Not so much as, I fear, he loved himself. No, that's jealousy talking. He does not so much love himself, as live within himself, with little left to share. He's easily bored; would take an Amazon devoured of all the books in Christendom to hold his interest more than the time it takes to get a good fuck out of him. He speaks with more honey, loves with more heat, and pleasures more patiently than any man I've let into this bed. Yet, (rubbing his genitals) he can be very hard to handle. Pity, his wife. This for nothing: he's also false.

### CARR

How (begins moaning) SO?

### LADY ESSEX

He never says it, but the moaning of his love sport says it all. 'I love thee, I love thee, love thee, aye!' as he brings the flesh to passion's throes. "He loves me." Huh! Takes time and tears to learn how men fall fast into love, each time their heat is up, and out of love before they even shrivel, much less button up their feigned affections.

### CARR

And boys?

He opens the book to a dog-eared page and  
gives it to her to read.

### LADY ESSEX

Wouldn't put it past him. Heard he had a pig once, were a sow though. He's not called wicked Will for naught. Passion he can conjure in a caterpillar's crawl. Pleasure in Spring's designing of a leaf. Rants for hours 'gainst injustice - words I've never even heard - then ends his coming with a rhyme as clever as the prettiest tinkle verse a lass could lust on. A poet born, that's our wicked Willie Shagstick. 'Struth, I am about him much too free. 'Tis love of old Will's love's to blame, not me. Can a man be thus with a lass and want for boys?

### CARR

I..., eh. (shrugs) No doubts?

### LADY ESSEX

On what?

He turns to a poem she reads as he enjoys her.

### LADY ESSEX

At fourteen I was wed, for politics, to a thirteen year old earl, too young to be allowed to come together, I was left alone, untouched. I welcomed other men's attentions, yes, but only Master Shakesoul's gentle ways and gentler words could ever give full pleasure.

**CARR**

You were not, even in the poet's mind, that dark-hued woman in his sonnets?

**LADY ESSEX**

Only if you were the beautiful earl.

**CARR**

I'm not an earl.

**LADY ESSEX**

But you are beautiful.  
Another year in the king's  
bed and...

**CARR**

'I love thee, I love thee,  
love thee, aye!" I'll never  
(a pre-mature ejaculation) last.

After they climax, he quickly dresses.

**LADY ESSEX**

Don't be embarrassed.

**CARR**

I want you to come with me. You must tell this to the king.

**LADY ESSEX**

No, I must not. You may tell the king for me, if you dare tell him how you learned it.

Carr kisses her with tender depth. He goes.

## SCENE 7 -THE TOWER PARAPET - LATE DUSK

Will, sniveling, sits in an alcove, editing the Bible. The Gaoler comes hustling up, signaling for someone to stay back.

**GAOLER**

Here you are! Like being wet, do you? The king commands me with you every minute. But must you be always inside when it's dry, and outside when it rains?

A woman's covered head appears around a wall visible only to the Gaoler

**WILL**

It is but English sunshine (a hacking cough) of a dank, dark, grey and misty hue. (tries to write, can't concentrate) I cannot write. (closes the book and paces) Will I ever again?

The Gaoler signals to the woman that he'll go off a ways. Will turns to see the Woman moving warily to him.

**WILL (CONT'D)**

Who are you? (annoyed by what he believes is another "Dark Lady" wannabe) And you have come for what?

She's shy to say before knowing Will's mood.

**WOMAN**

You... (disguising her voice) sir, of course.

**WILL**

Why me, of course? (no response) I had you once, is that it?

**WOMAN**

Had me? (a knowing sneer in her voice) O yes, but not...

**WILL**

And now you need assurance I won't speak of it.

**WOMAN**

I've had enough of that.

**WILL**

Madam, I never speak of the women I've had.

**WOMAN**

Except in your sonnets.

**WILL**

Then proof that you are not my dark hued muse. Have you read them?

**WOMAN**

Have you had so many women?

**WILL**

(the mystery of this woman intrigues him)  
Where did I have you?

**WOMAN**

(enjoying the game her anonymity has set up)  
At home, I am told.

**WILL**

In your father's house? I'd never be so reckless.

**WOMAN**

Reckless, indeed, if mother's to be believed. You did it just often enough between your comings and goings.

**WILL**

I know that voice. Your mother knew about us, you say?

**WOMAN**

She was a party to your having of me.

**WILL**

A mother and her child, together? I think I'd remember that.

**WOMAN**

I think you do remember. Though I've thought for long you'd chosen to forget.

Will sets the Bible down.

**WILL**

Let me see your face, Mistress Mysterious. No? Then give me what you have for me to sign and leave me to my fate.

**WOMAN**

What would I have for you to sign?

**WILL**

Proof of your virginity. Denial of adultery. Isn't that why you've come? Don't expect me to supply the paper; I don't have enough to write my way out of this fortress. Would you have me sign your breast. Your ass? Come, woman, we're both getting soaked. Let me kiss your cares away, then go.

He pulls her close to kiss her. She pulls away. He's overcome with coughing.

**WOMAN**

Father! Are you ill?

Concerned, the Gaoler approaches. She moves to warm him in her arms.

**WILL**

Father?

**WOMAN (REVEALED AS JUDITH)**

We were afraid you'd not be well when the Earl's Men...

**WILL**

Judith! God's wounds!!  
How could you speak to me  
as you have, errant daughter?  
(sees to the Gaoler) I've you  
to thank for this, have I?

**JUDITH**

Ma's sick worried, but denies it.  
How speak you as you have,  
neglectant parent? Remote husband!

**JUDITH**

The Earlsmen took you, so I first went to your Earl.

**WILL**

You spoke to the Earl?

**JUDITH**

Even now I could see how pretty he must have been, your earl, in his youth.

Will turns to go. The Gaoler blocks him.

**WILL**

Did she tell you what she's come for?

**GAOL**

Aye, sir. A father.

**JUDITH**

More specifically, the reason mine abandoned me.

**WILL**

O Judith.

**JUDITH**

Where have you been all my life, father?

**WILL**

Scribbling mine away in a priest-hole, I fear.

**JUDITH**

Shrouding yourself in a veil of foolscap?

**WILL**

Shrouding, aye. None too shrewdly, more's the pity.

**JUDITH**

From what? Or whom?

**WILL**

The devil.

**JUDITH**

Ma says from god.

**WILL**

She despairs for my soul, since I will not declare for her god.

Judith dries his face with her shawl.

**JUDITH**

Why is that?

**WILL**

(looks at her, suddenly a painful out loud admission)

I, I, I have no faith.

**JUDITH**

Everyone has faith, da.

**WILL**

Do they? Each time I sit me down to write, a world of counterfeit certainties leaps to war within. The Celtic of my core roars up to claim my arts, and pagan impulses of ancestral shadows murmur thru my intuited soul. I am so lost and have so long been searching for a wholeness, I cannot bear to think I've many years of this entortured life to live.

**JUDITH**

O da! You've many yet.

**WILL**

You don't understand.

**JUDITH**

Make me.

**WILL**

No. Go, Please.

He embraces her as a goodbye, but she won't let go, the warmth and comfort of her soon overwhelm him.

**WILL**

O, my singular twins, (the memory brings tears) you and...

**JUDITH**

Hamnet. Yes, it's good to say his name aloud, isn't it? To let us out of our secret prison.

**WILL**

O, bless, O bless his youth-bound spirit.

**JUDITH**

Who, dying, took my heart.

**WILL**

And almost mine.

**JUDITH**

With only enough left for your sonnets?

**WILL**

When a man-child dies, something in his father dies.

**JUDITH**

I am that the remnants of that something, aren't I, pa?

**WILL**

(sweetly)

No, no. Each time I look at you...

**JUDITH**

You see dead Hamnet.

**WILL**

No. Judith, please...

**JUDITH**

I know. He was my manly half, da, dead for me as thee. And with his death, I, I cannot find my self. I've lost my life's reflection.

**WILL**

I think sometimes I see him. (searching her face) I, I see him in...

**JUDITH**

(tears for Hamnet, anger for Will)

In me. And can't endure the sight: a dead son in a living daughter's face.

**WILL**

I wanted you with me, as I had planned for him, but nature had not...

**JUDITH**

Pricked me out?

**WILL**

O Judith, please.

**JUDITH**

No, I was left to be the unneeded negative of your most precious positive, a negativity that has become an abyss between us.

**WILL**

And that abyss is now my life.

**JUDITH**

Pa... I didn't kill Hamnet.

**WILL**

Of course, you didn't.

**JUDITH**

But I am there, in the room by his bed, every night - my vigil, holding his hand, wiping his brow, watching him search my weeping eyes as Death creeps in. And with its boney claws, the beast rips Hamnet from my heart. My grief walks back and forth with that slight limp of his. Misery fills his bed, sorrow sits in his little chair, till hope leaps out our window in the early dawn to find some meager pleasure in a day of larkspur and butterflies. I am the shade still sharing our haunted room. For when he murmured those last words, all life's hope then was spent for both of us.

**WILL**

You never said. Tell me his words?

**JUDITH**

"Papa won't come, will he?"

**WILL**

O hold, my heart!

**JUDITH**

I told him papa's everywhere, and nowhere. I did not think to say, in a priest hole.

The search out all the years missed between them in each other's eyes, softly weeping and laughing. He can take no more.

**WILL**

Leave me to make an end of the past. Gaoler?!

He tears himself away, picks up the bible and starts off. His way is blocked by the Gaoler.

**GAOLER**

You cannot want to walk away, Neglectant Father, not this time.

A bell off. The Gaoler runs out.

**JUDITH**

Ha! (wraps her arms around Will from behind) The one good thing in having a father under guard: he cannot end a conversation walking out.

**WILL**

You've got your mother's saucy ways and sassy tongue.

**JUDITH**

I'm neither sauce nor sass, but speak the truth.

**WILL**

It is a hard truth you teach me now. (relaxing into her embrace) A good truth, sweet school mistress.

**JUDITH**

(feeling the bible in his hands) What's this?

**WILL**

The king's new bible.

**JUDITH**

Did I not see you writing in it? (sees the bookmarked page with his writings) You're sitting in the rain on a stony parapet altering the Bible? Da, how can you correct the words of a god you can't believe in?

**WILL**

Shh! How say you this? I've never even whispered such thing.

**JUDITH**

I've read your plays. It's written 'twixt the lines.

**GAOLER (O.S.)**

Master Shakespeare. Master...

The Gaoler, gasping for breath, runs in.

**GAOLER**

Come. The king will speak with you. (to Judith) Back to his cell.

**WILL**

Now?

**GAOLER**

I am sent ahead. Now? Soon? Later? Who knows the crown'ed whim?

**WILL**

As king, he'd summon me, not have you come announcing his arrival?

The Earl enters.

**EARL (CONT'D)**

He isn't. I am.

**WILL**

Harry.

**EARL**

The king wants his play...

**WILL**

In time.

**EARL**

Tonight.

**WILL**

He can't have it tonight or tomorrow, or...

**GAOLER**

But he's our sovereign lord, sir.

**EARL**

You'll have to give him...

**WILL**

Whatever I've got? No, I... I've only started.

**EARL**

The Bishop of London and Sir Francis, will be with him.

**WILL**

And that Sexton. Francis Bacon?

**EARL**

The Bishop's planning hellfire, brimstone, and heads-to-roll. You need Sir Francis's devotion to your work.

**WILL**

The man thinks theater frivolous.

**EARL**

But not a criminal offense. He cherishes your poetry, but finds when in your poetic thrall the groundlings become dangerous. Come, pretty lass.

**JUDITH**

I'd like to meet the king.

**WILL**

Go home, Jude. Go now.

Will embraces her with all the love she's longed for.

**EARL**

He'll be drunk, and offensive and dangerous. (gently takes Judith's hand, with an aristocratic air that startles her) And a cell in the Bloody Tower of London is no place for a girl to meet a king.

Earl leads Judith off one way, the Gaoler  
leads Will out the other.

## ACT FIVE

### SCENE 8 - NUNNERY (BAWDY HOUSE) ON CLERKENWELL ST.

A desperate and furtive Sexton moves to a red door and knocks. A gaudily dressed door-keep, a woman named **MAG**, 50, the Hag, opens the door.

**MAG**

Now here's a randy fellow. What's your taste, milord?

**SEXTON**

A dark eyed, dark haired woman bawds these rooms? A Lucy?

Unseen by Sexton, **LUCY**, 30, a swarthy, dark woman approaches, listening. A stunning creature, 30's, dressed in a blood-red gown just beyond elegance into gaudy. Her hair a huge cascade of ebony, her skin a deep rich mahogany, her giant deep, black eyes flashing wildly. Perhaps she's of Moorish ancestry or Hindu?

**MAG**

My mistress-master's such a lady. (opens his cloak; he closes it) Cost ye more'n shilling a toss to lie with her. Though from the look o'yer satins you could find it. Stuff it in your codpiece, do ye?

Grabbing her hand, he pulls her face-to-face.

**SEXTON**

You call her mistress-master?

**MAG**

Whatcha wan' wid 'er?

**SEXTON**

I want her mark on this. (holds out a deposition) She's been inspiring dangerous poetry. A traitorous poet's in London Tower cause of her, and she's to join him soon.

**MAG**

Had a poet or two, she 'as. Not a traitor. Don't know about no writin'.

Lucy comes to the door, hiding a whip in her skirt folds.

**LUCY**

Mag, you old hag. Givin' out to a Bishop's spy in the doorway?

**MAG**

(feigning surprise)

You a spy?

**LUCY**

Churchman, anyway. Seen y'about, 'aven't I? Five a poke.

**SEXTON**

I don't want a poke. Five shillings?

**MAG**

Bargain for a man you're size.

**SEXTON**

Fuck you. I want your mark on this.

**LUCY**

Six with rough language.

**MAG**

Looking for a poet's muse, sez he.

**LUCY**

Why here? Why me?

**SEXTON**

You've been consorting with a traitor. The king wants a confession.

**MAG**

Sounds like you ain't here for cunny.

**LUCY**

Nothing to confess to.

**SEXTON**

You've been consorting with Will Shakespeare. I could bring (grabs the whip) the sheriff round.

Lucy walks away. He starts to follow.  
Shaking her head, Mag cracks the whip Lucy  
secretly passed her.

**MAG**

The High Sheriff? He's in the red room. Want I should get him?

**SEXTON**

(check mate; releases the whip)  
Have a good evening.

**MAG**

With men like you in the world, it ain't easy, is it?

Frantically, he exits. Mag slams the door.

## SCENE 9 - WILL'S CELL, TOWER OF LONDON

The Gaoler is putting shackles on Will's feet.

**GAOLER**

Sorry, sir, but in the presence of the king - official - rules say prisoners must be bound.

The Gaoler exits. Will, coughing, pouring  
over the King's Bible, pen in hand.

The Gaoler leads in the King who's sipping a  
cup of wine, Carr with a jug, Bacon and the  
Bishop with footmen bringing comfortable  
chairs. Coughing, Will works on.

**BACON**

Master Shakespeare!

The King sits and drinks, kissing Carr. Then turns to Shakespeare.

**KING**

Where's my play? (waits, no response, the re: wine) More. (to Will) Show me what you have.

Will stands, pulls himself together and faces the King, just as he's about to speak...

The Sexton, rushes in with depositions and books. He sets out his documents for his prosecution, then looks up. All eyes on Will.

**WILL**

Sire. I have nothing.

The Earl enters with Condell and Fletcher.

**EARL**

Sorry, sire, I thought you'd want players to perform your play.

Starting to go, the Bishop is blocked by the Gaoler, then quietly scolds an impervious Fletcher.

**BACON**

Except it's not been written.

**WILL**

No.

**SEXTON**

(secretly pleased)  
He's failed.

**WILL**

(snidely)  
I have not failed... what I've not yet attempted.

**BISHOP**

(to the Earl, snidely)  
All your efforts come to nothing.

**KING**

Is he being fucking clever with me?

**WILL**

He fucking doesn't think so, sire.

The King hides his chuckling from the Bishop's disapproving stare.

**KING**

(hides his chuckling from the Bishop's disapproving stare)  
Unshackle the man, good turnkey,

**SEXTON**

Sirs. As all this evidence attests, with angels for muses this so-called poet couldn't...

**KING**

Evidence, man. (knocks the papers to the floor) He is the evidence. Muses be damned! (to Will) We signed a compact! (gulps, calling for wine) More.

The Sexton starts to speak but the Bishop holds him back.

**BACON**

So what does this mean, Bishop?

**BISHOP**

The poet is unmasked: a player, and a fraud.

**KING**

My play has not been  
written, Harry. Your  
Virginia Compact won't  
be signed. No pillaging  
my America this year.  
That was the bargain!

**SEXTON**

And now to rack him.  
(to Will)  
Who's the rebel writer?

**BACON**

Sir!

The King and Carr hurriedly exit.

**BISHOP**

(to the Sexton, rushing out)

Bring your evidence!

**BACON**

You need to give him something, Harry! And quickly!

Bacon hurries off after the King followed by  
the Sexton trying to hold all his papers. The  
Gaoler has the footmen take the chairs.

Watching them go, The Earl turns to Will.

**WILL**

Nothing. Like fine wine, poetics needs its singular time.

**EARL**

I watched you once write reams of flowery verses in a nonce.

**WILL**

In your bed, you do remember.

**EARL**

Do it, now. Again. If ever I meant half as much to you as you to me.

**WILL**

Harry, please, I can't.

**EARL**

You will and quickly. Or we'll see you drawn and quartered come the  
dawn. (to CondeLL) See to it! (to Will) Write!

**WILL**

Harry, that was half a life ago. The quick and easy flow is choked.

Earl's gone, after the king.

**CONDELL**

No, Will, not twelve months since. Stop playing petulant anger.

**WILL**

I wrote those poems of him in a midsummer dream.

**FLETCHER**

You forget last summer at the Mermaid.

Fletcher directs CondeLL to help him move the  
table, set up the ink, quill and paper.

**FLETCHER****CONDELL**

(to the Gaoler)

The Lawyer Krink. Recall  
him settling cases In the  
Tavern, one about a thief?

Let the King be Lawyer Krink  
To you; your muse.

Get the Earl to bring  
the King.

The Gaoler rushes out.  
You made from it a scene in  
seven minutes.  
Tops.

**GAOLER**

Your grace.

The Earl appears.

**EARL**

Will? A play? Or Tyburn Hill?

**CONDELL**

A play.

**WILL**

But you must help.

**EARL**

I cannot write two lines of doggerel.

**FLETCHER**

He'll do the poetry. You get them talking.

**EARL**

Talking? What about?

**WILL**

(handing the Earl the king's warrant)

I've no idea. He wants to hear how god will speak to him.

**EARL**

God?

**WILL**

How am I to write that?

**FLETCHER**

Many's the king I've watched you play.

**CONDELL**

And you always act as if you're god!

The King, sloshed and annoyed, stumbles in  
with the aid of his irritated retinue, and the  
chairs. Will grabs the wine from Carr and  
gulps some down.

**FLETCHER**

Ask him if he's ever talked with god.

**WILL**

What said and whence? How...

**EARL**

Will, I can't interrogate  
the king.

**KING**

Let's have it!  
Play!

**BACON**

(approaching the Earl, sotto voce)

The king's near drunk-asleep and won't sit long.

**WILL**

He revels in the timbre of his voice, just give him guidance.

**FLETCHER**

Ask Sir Francis, he does it every day.

The Earl who then whispers to a much  
displeased Bacon, who reluctantly nods.

**BACON**

As counsel to the crown, I ask the charge.

**SEXTON**

The King knows the charge. He made it.

**BACON**

The law allows that...

**SEXTON**

The King need only know all the facts! And heaven's will. No more!

**EARL**

How does the king then learn the will of heaven?

**KING**

By speaking to god, how else?

**EARL**

You speak to god?

**CARR**

Regularly!

**KING**

Every day, he comes to me.

**EARL**

Where?

**KING**

I, I don't know the where...

(there's a whoosh! The King and the Gaoler look around)

I, in my cham...

(a haunting sigh is heard by The King and the Gaoler and now the Sexton and Will)

My prayers, in the nearly dark twixt night and dawn.

Condell pours Will more wine as he writes  
furiously.

Throughout the following recounting of the  
King's dream, there is a rattling of chains,  
the occasional clash of swords, gasps and  
child-like whimpers.

**WILL**

In limbo.

**BISHOP**

Limbo is a papist refuge for old fools.

**CARR**

Lord Bishop did you just call the king a fool?

**BISHOP**

(reassuring the king)

Nay, sire, I...

**BACON**

Limbo's just a word for the soul's last site  
Betwixt the hope of dawn and hellish night.

**KING**

Aye, such it is; he speaks it right.

Condell and Fletcher move around the cell,  
placing candles, sorting "ghostie" things with  
the Gaoler to dress the King's dream. It is  
clear that the Bishop, Bacon, Carr and the  
Earl are oblivious to the ghottly presences  
perceived by the Sexton, the Gaoler, Will, and  
the King. Fletcher and Condell half sense  
something, but what?

**EARL**

How came our Lord to you, sire?

**KING**

What? How came? As in... (gulps his wine) in a dream. Like Solomon's.

**EARL**

What saw you there?

The King rises to grasp at something his and  
the Gaoler's minds' eyes see.

**KING**

A, a... (thinks then bursts out with:) A dazzling light! (conjuring his  
fearsome dream) Then...

Then angels glittering white and pure, A wide-  
Winged host, to greet me with the royal pomp  
Of heaven. And, and, clothed me they in radiant  
Robes of star light wove, as fitting regal grandeur  
For the meeting of two gods. (catching his blasphemy) Eh, god  
And's earthly incarnation.

**EARL**

Met by white-winged angels.

All the "ghostie" refuse suddenly seems  
animate, as the king relives his nightmare.

**KING**

Aye,

And all his horde were there.

**BISHOP**

The devil?

**KING**

Aye,

Poor Bishop, aye. For even round the glow  
Of angels, devils lurk.

**WILL**

How did he dress,

The fiend?

**KING**

In inky black, like to a throng  
Of splendid shadows hovering in the shades  
Around the edge of that strange emptiness.

**EARL**

Twas then you met with god?

**KING**

I spoke.

**BISHOP**

What say you?

**KING**

(childlike as confessing, shamed and scared)  
 Forgive me for my many foul transgressions,  
 O my lord, I, I, I'm lost and kept by wolves, and...

**SEXTON**

(to the Bishop)  
 Your grace, the king is clearly, not in his...

**KING**

For since my mother gaoled and father slain.  
 Hard handled much by Ross. Cruel Gowrie. Gone,  
 My Esme, took away; where's he, the one,  
 The only ever loved me, now? I'd have  
 Sweet Esme here. (to Will) Know you him, sir? My love?  
 Write this: say Esme was, is ever, shall...

The King grabs and guzzles from the bottle, as  
 the emotional memories overwhelm him. He  
 swoons.

**CARR**

The King's gone off.

Bacon and the Earl carry him to his chair and  
 fan him. Will and his copyists work furiously.

**BACON**

We'll stop here now. We will resume when his...

**KING**

I (rousing, trying to stand)  
 I am, I come to, to see...  
 My play. (drinks more)

**BACON**

Yes, sire.  
 Harry?

**EARL**

First, let us have the Sexton prosecute his charge. (interrupting the  
 Sexton launch his prosecution) I'm told, sir, you wrote out a deposition  
 for the Earl of Oxford's widow.

**BACON**

Wrote for her?

**EARL**

Which claims her long dead husband authored all Will's plays and  
 verses.

**KING**

Her dead husband? Wrote  
 Out? Is't legal, Francis?

**SEXTON**

You are mistaken, sir.  
 I've no such document.

**EARL**

Tis fit. It would be tainted had you it. Good Gaoler.

**GAOLER**

Aye, milord.

**EARL**

The poet's been your constant charge upon the king's commanded?

**GAOLER**

Just so, your grace?

**EARL**

No man has passed him writings, pages?

**SEXTON**

No man, nay. But he had a whore who could...

**KING**

I sent her off to the stews a week ago. Move on.

**SEXTON**

This was a wanton slut, here, just today, your majesty.

**WILL**

What wanton slut?

**SEXTON**

Upon the parapet. You did embrace her.

**WILL**

That was no whore.

**GAOLER**

That was his girl.

**SEXTON**

His daughter? Well, the Warders savored her, I'm told, but then what is the daughter of a whoreson but a brothel's bawd?

Will leaps to attack the Sexton. The Earl blocks him and the Gaoler holds him back.

**EARL**

If we might continue?

The Earl urges Gaoler to keep talking, which he does - silently - as Will frantically directs Condell and Fletcher in making their copies. As he speaks the following, he changes lines, listening with one ear to the unheard conversation between the others, reveling in his wordings, making the lines more pointed.

**WILL**

Unlike your bastion crown, art's laurel circlet  
Is no fortress from fate's risk and menace.

(as he writes, a sudden revelation)

Do I perceive how I myself, with words  
That conjure worldly motives, ope' the gate  
That guards the draw way through this helpless heart?

(changes a phrase, then)

'Tis thus these men so eas'ly siege my life.  
By staging me so privately so nakedly  
I serve the innards of my soul to beasts  
To feed the rav'nous vultures of their minds.

(another change, interrupted by:)

Then now's the time! (writes) Write, fool! O let

The fall of this errant poet come as may,  
 But only tell the sad tale of this king,  
 And give the troubled truths  
 Aye, now's the time to speak. Now dare to die!  
 For 'tis th'injusticed time of day-dreamed man  
 Foiled in the act of living, aye, when all  
 His somehow hopes are left unaided,  
 And wisdom is the thund'ring roll of madness.  
 Once! At last! Let mine own sound and fury reign!

**CONDELL**

Will!

**FLETCHER**

Enough.

The Earl and the Sexton have been  
 interrogating the Gaoler. In his drunkenness,  
 the King takes pity on him.

**BACON**

No need for shame, good turnkey,

**KING**

Nay, tell how the poet spent his days, as I had ordered you.

**WILL**

Thinking, sire.

**BISHOP**

Of what?

**WILL**

How to compose the play the king demands.

**SEXTON**

How?

Will, Fletcher and Condell waves the pages.  
 Robin sends the Gaoler out for more wine.

**WILL**

I watched and listened 'til I found a moment twixt a king and's god,  
 as from his majesty's new Bible.

**BISHOP**

"A King and his god?!"

**KING**

My idea. (to Will) Watched who?

**BACON**

Listened to what?

**SEXTON**

How?

**WILL**

With this scruffy quill. You have, milords, been present at the  
 alchemizing of your words. Now are they art.

**KING**

Play it! Now.

**CARR**

Does that mean we are creatures in your play?

**WILL**

Not creatures, sir, but characters, if you would. (tears off and hands Carr half a page) And being here so few, sire, may I ask you to portray yourself?

**KING**

Portray myself? In my play?

The Gaoler returns and hands Carr the wine.  
He's dragged into the players' huddle.

**WILL**

The hero, sire. (filling the king's cup with wine)

The King nods and gulps, as Carr is thrilled by what he reads.

Condell and Rice douse some lights, move others to create a ghostly **LIMBO**.

**KING**

Who better me, than I? (gulps the wine and pours more)

**FLETCHER**

(aside to Will)

This play's the thing wherein you'll clear the conscience of a king?

**KING**

Well, poet... What am I to do?

**WILL**

It will be clear, your majesty.

**KING**

Begin!

The Gaoler offers costumes and props from the "Ghostie" stuff for Condell's approval - some accepted; others, ridiculous, rejected. He will find ashes for snow, and cobwebs "for effect," enjoying his Tits-like role.

**WILL**

Watch! Listen close, milords, and please allow  
My wits and all your worries to conjoin.  
And 'fore my 'magination's last, long sleep  
Find in my words, man's fate when faith is deep.

Seeing an intrigued and excited King being covered in rags and cobwebs, the Sexton begins to object. But Will stops him.

**WILL (CONT'D)**

And if I fail your humble patience, let  
Your earthly verdict quickly bring that axe  
That has been long your church's free-thought tax

**CARR (PROLOGUE)**

O, for the inspiration Heaven promises,  
Some means to make the magic muses rouse.  
To summon up, within this cold dark cell,  
More than the vasty fields of kings' ambitions,  
Acts of princes, more than monarchs' dreams,  
That now-reform'ed Limbo where all wrongs  
Await their time, and righteousness reigns null.  
Concede me only, in this stony space,

That I may conjure now the guiding sway  
 And full force winds of angels wings, the brash  
 And bitter passions hardened in the pyres  
 Of hell, and last, the thund'rous declamations  
 Of a much perturb'd and distraught deity.

**KING**

Well, spoken, pretty Robin. Where's my part?  
 Give me what I'm to say. I must prepare.

Will hands the king his "role." But before he  
 can read it, Will nods to Condell and  
**Mephistopheles**, and the King is lead to  
 center, as **Penitent** to encounter Rice as the  
**Archangel Michael**.

Condell directs Fletcher, Carr, and the Gaoler  
 to light and move candles to create an aura.

**WILL**

Wouldst speak these few lines?

**KING**

When do I appear?

**CONDELL**

As fits a king, you'll be escorted whence.

Will has moved into the darkness as the play  
 begins.

**WILL (CONT'D)**

Act One, Scene - The nearly dark twixt night and dawn.

**ARCHANGEL**

Halt! Who begs a parley in this province of the living dead?

**MEPHISTOPHELES**

(to Archangel Michael)

Well met in Limbo, Michael, (snidely) brave archangel.

**ARCHANGEL**

Bold Mephistopheles? What hast thou there?

**BISHOP**

He speaks of a king as "what?"

Even as it becomes a tussle, with the king  
 being dressed and undressed, the King shushes  
 the Bishop. Though daggers and swords are  
 being wrestled over and precariously juggled,  
 the King is drunk enough to be enjoying the  
 danger and the alarm of his "audience," when  
 he is suddenly aware of spirits in the air.

**MEPHISTOPHELES**

The remains of th'anointed Penitent, James the Scot?  
 What's he to you that he's required here?

**ARCHANGEL**

The Lord's reprieve's are mysteries to us all.

**KING**

Reprieve?

Haunting sounds and movements of the "ghostie"  
stuff all play a part in the suspension of  
disbelief as the King's play develops.

**MEPHISTOPHELES**

To Hell was rightly sent 'pon his death.

**KING**

(aside to Rice)

How do I play a dead man?

**ARCHANGEL**

Think thoughts  
Of heaven, instead of earthly pleasures bid.  
Kneel there, dead penitent! And bow thy head!

**KING**

(aside to Will)

You've writ my final judgment, poet? Aye,

**WILL**

(sotto voce, to the king)

Aye,  
Speak now, my liege, "head" was the actor's cue.

**KING**

Ah... eh... My words, where are my words? uh... Aye!

**KING AS PENITENT**

Where hast thou led me? Speak. I'll go no further.

**MEPHISTOPHELES**

Thine hour has come. This? Limbo, where from whence  
Thou wilt join me in sulphurous and tormenting  
Flames...

**ARCHANGEL**

Or to a timeless purgatory cast.

Someone has tap or poke the king when it's his  
turn, he gets to wrapped up in listening.

**KING**

No paradise?!

**ARCHANGEL**

Poor king, lend now thy serious hearing  
To what we shall full unfold.

**PENITENT**

Speak; I am bound to hear.

**ARCHANGEL**

Thou art a sorry spirit, royal fool,  
At best art doom'd a certain term to walk  
This dark abyss, till foul crimes done in life  
Are judged and sent for purging.

**MEPHISTOPHELES**

Nay, to burn!  
To know the secrets thou hast hid in thy  
Mind's prison-house, the full tale told, such sins  
Will harrow up thy soul, freeze thy rank blood.

**KING**

Wine, Robin, more wine.

**ARCHANGEL**

List, list, O, list! If thou hast hope of heaven.

Condell rattles the King's chains. The King assumes he's being cued to speak and looks for lines on his role.

**PENITENT**

Speak on!

**BISHOP**

Your majesty...!

**MEPHISTOPHELES**

(grabbing the King's chains)

Hell hath full right to this pernicious soul.  
He was to've been as grand a king as he  
Was great a sinner. Yet hath he out-deviled  
Even me. Why then am I called forth?

**ARCHANGEL**

In's prayers he firm desired to be good  
But being weak and lamely, troubled and  
Too glibly tempted by thy fiends of hell  
Through these ill-counseling, lying, monstrous beasts,  
So God himself has deigned to judge anew.

**KING**

'Tis fitting, fitting, poet. God. himself!

**MEPHISTOPHELES**

You know not what he's done or you'd agree  
That he belongs with Lucifer in hell.  
For he is undeserving e'en the sight  
Of god that I have been so long denied.  
When he betrayed the laws of heaven in  
His judgments he forsook the work of kings.

Again, Condell rattles the King's chains.

**ARCHANGEL**

How like to Jacob doth he seem.  
So anxious now to wrestle with thy god.  
Who art thou?

**MEPHISTOPHELES**

Once the king o'the British Isles,  
This is the ghostly dis-embodiment  
Of a gross usurping king...

Mephistopheles stops the King with another rattle.

**KING**

(finding no lines, speaks as himself)

My crown is mine by right.  
I usurped nothing.

"GOD" appears (Will, amidst a plethora of candles, giving him a deific glow). Beside him the Gaoler holding a ball-and-chain mace and a regal robe.

Disallowed the face of god, Mephistopheles  
looks away and cover his eyes with his hood.

**GOD**

Thou didst with pride usurp the place of god.  
And used his earthly priests with grossest pride.

The Bishop is smugly, but secretly pleased  
with these accusations against the king.

**KING**

I, I... How did I die?

**MEPHISTOPHELES**

A gutless, greedy man, poor soul, despairingly.

**ARCHANGEL**

And didst not even think to die w'the name  
Of Jesus on thy lips.

**KING**

I did? Didn't I? I meant to. I will. I, I promise.

**GOD**

O sad and troubled monarch, happ'ly dead.

**KING**

(dazedly trying to make sense of his scribbled script)  
My play... 'tis strange, my words rude. Please, I'm lost.

**GOD**

And so I am come to thee...

**KING**

As in the dream of Solomon.

The King is overwhelmed, suddenly believing  
it's all happening to him, his final judgment.

**GOD**

To know what ilk of man would claim my rights?

**MEPHISTOPHELES**

His life has been a lewd unnatural slaughter.

**ARCHANGEL**

But, lord, he kept the peace!

**MEPHISTOPHELES**

With tricks and lies!  
His uncouth slaughters, born of want profane,  
Neglect and hate most foul, strange and unnatural.

**KING**

Haste me to know't, and grant, with wings as swift  
As angels waft and for my love of thee,  
That I have time to sweep all sins away.

**ARCHANGEL**

His tone is apt.

**GOD**

But life's last wish is lost  
To him.

**ARCHANGEL**

Thy time's used up.

**GOD**

Now, god fake, hear.

**ARCHANGEL**

O Lord, that serpent stung him at his birth,  
And spent his friends and foes to test his faith.

**GOD**

Yet ne'er didst he endure faith's curative  
But taunted fate and fortune, schemed...

**PENITENT**

I sought  
To soothe my weeping throb...

**MEPHISTOPHELES**

With vengeful acts  
That wronged the poor and raped the helpless land.

**GOD**

And worse, thou claimed my rights!

**KING**

Such unaccustomed thoughts to plague my mind!

**GOD**

O, what a falling-off hadst thou, poor king!

**MEPHISTOPHELES**

Sunk to an incestuous, vile adulterate beast,  
Used leperous witchcraft, trained in traitorous gifts,  
And used thy wicked power to seduce -  
And took abed this innocent, abused his flesh  
And soured his natu'rally noble heart, and why?  
To feed your shameful lust and shameless pride.

**ARCHANGEL**

Then like a poorly 'prenticed player took this role  
And wearing this coiled serpent like a crown.  
Did feign a seeming-virtuous king - and god!  
And all the while caroused to prey on garbage.

**KING**

O, horrible! O, horrible! most horrible!

**GOD**

What reckoning made?

**PENITENT**

Why sent to this account  
With all my imperfections on my head?

**MEPHISTOPHELES**

When he had nature in him, thus he lived;  
A couch for luxury and damned incest.

The Gaoler comes forward with mace and robe.

**KING**

What things are these?

**GOD**

The choices of thy fate for all eternity:

Carr stands forward and holds out the mace.

**SERAPHIM** (PLAYED BY THE CARR)

A crude clawed mace as used by Christ's dread torturers.

**MEPHISTOPHELES**

To pierce thy flesh with blood-holes, each a sin  
Of thy commission, gushing forth thy rancid blood  
To dye the ocean, foul the air, and stain the land.

**KING**

And that?

**SERAPHIM**

(holding out the robe)

The gilded robe of Heaven's Glory.

**ARCHANGEL**

Adorning kings who for their stately wrongs  
Didst find forgiv'ness. Didst thou? Speak, king, which  
Be thine?

**MEPHISTOPHELES**

What warrants this proceedings? Sinned  
He has, and unrepentant did he die.

**KING**

Not so.

**ARCHANGEL**

How say ye that?

**KING**

I've earned the robe.

**MEPHISTOPHELES**

No. God, bound in by heaven's justice, strike!  
Or not? Let me. I'll use this man's cruel claw  
On him as he did use it while he lived  
And preache d it as the virtues he denied,

**GOD**

This claw correctly symbols him.

**MEPHISTOPHELES**

So let me flog his flesh forevermore  
In th'everlasting flames to which thou hast  
Condemned me for my mere immodesty.  
He damned the innocents from vanity.

**BISHOP**

(to Condell)

You cannot judge a king with such cruel words.

**EARL**

It is a play, your grace.

**GOD**

I speak as God, would God not speak his mind?

**SEXTON**

You are not God.

**GOD**

Are you?

**SEXTON**

I do not claim to be. I am...

**GOD**

No, fool,  
You are the toady minion of this most  
Ambitious Bishop, th'prosecuting fiend  
Profess'd to know God's wishes for all men.  
Be warned! You, serve no saintlier a cause  
Than furthering this mitred devil's rise  
On an incensed cloud of piety to fit  
The golden horn-o'plenty crown upon  
His head in Canterbury. (in the Bishop's face)  
This vicar of vice who hordes the pewter  
Poor plate not of one but seven flocks  
To sate his love of luxury; he preaches  
Christian virtue while he practices  
It's sins of sloth and gluttony, but most  
Of envy, jealous as he is of players who  
Gain sustenance by bringing truths of men  
Of rank and power to the poor.

**BACON**

Where's proof of this dull bishop's ill-intent could?

**GOD**

In god's omniscient eyes, O, crafty, brave,  
And proper knight, Sir Francis, who  
Alone has risen on his merits and  
Demerits, as the backstairs adjunct of  
The crown, of any crown. (sotto voce to the King) Twas he who spoke  
And argued twas most politic, the Queen  
Should execute thy regal mother, king.

**EARL**

You do grasp what you are doing, Will.

**GOD**

Now speaks another gem of thy jew'll'd court  
Sir Harry Wroithesley, noble Earl, who tempts  
Thee with new ventures in Virginia wilds.  
See here a master of seductive greed, dull king.  
A one who sailed the seas for fame and ill  
Got booty, fought the Irish wars abed  
With warriors in an Irish bog tent, whence  
He fled the field to make an ill conceiv'ed  
Rebellion and when Bess was fina'lly gone,  
Like him (Bacon), set out to suck your God-tit dry.  
A such a one as does abandon love for lust.

**SEXTON**

Be these the words of god or just a poet?

**WILL**

I know not what's a difference, sir, do you?

**SEXTON**

This is such poetry as will tomorrow hang you.

**BACON**

The king alone will make that fateful judgment.

**GOD**

What kind of king presumes God's judgment his?  
What dost thou with thy false divinity?

**ARCHANGEL**

He wants for better, lord, but is unruly.

**GOD**

Unruly, king? How sit upon a throne  
If canst not rule well even o'er thyself?

**KING**

I can. I do. I try. Since I could speak,  
I've praised thee god while suff'ring curs'ed  
Witchery. O pretty Robin, speak for me.

**CARR**

I have no lines nor acts to play here, liege.

**MEPHISTOPHELES**

Has he one act to place upon hope's balance?  
An expectant beat, but no answer.

**ARCHANGEL**

No thing did he, or made, or gave in charity?  
A long moment.

**GOD**

He loved a poet once, and let him live.

**KING**

I did.  
I do.  
I will.

**BISHOP**

Stop this.  
Guard, gag him.

**GOD**

O regal sinner, hear the wrath of god!  
Thou, ill-anointed king, art cursed to have  
Thy name used as a witch's chant and for  
Millennia to roam the cesspools of  
The land by day and drag your gilded cross  
To a craven church's hidden Calvary,  
And every night thou shalt re-dig thy grave  
Where the land you feed off meets the seas of time  
That obliterate your footprints with the waves  
Of your people tears and wash up sand to fill  
Your grave and leave no lasting marker of  
Your king-work.

The Sexton ENDS THE PLAY, pulling the costumes  
pieces off the actors. The Bishop takes the  
candles from the Gaoler and lights them to  
brighten the cell.

**SEXTON**

(grabs a dagger and rushes at Will)  
You cannot bring my God upon this stage.

**WILL**

I have a warrant from the king, (takes out the warrant, appealing to the Bishop) Your grace.

At Bacon's direction, the Gaoler with his halbert holds back the Bishop.

**BACON**

Give me that warrant.

The Sexton grabs the warrant and reads until Bacon grabs it.

**BISHOP**

No. This thing is done!

**KING**

You'll stay till I give leave to go.

**WILL**

(to the Sexton)  
How should god be that I've not brought him here?

**SEXTON**

As in this bible, he revealed himself.

**WILL**

God has revealed himself?

**SEXTON**

(pointing to the bible)  
That is the record of his word.

**WILL**

These are the myths and legends of the Jews - whom you despise. A rare collection of sublime and sordid tales. (a sudden revelation!) You say god wrote this book?

**BACON**

Shakespeare, watch your tongue.

**WILL**

No more. (to the Sexton) What evidence, cur, have you of that?

**SEXTON**

Eh, (looking to the Bishop for help) We have the ancient script from Moses' hand as God once spoke the words - in Genesis, and Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, Numbers. God's awe-inspired words!

**WILL**

Writ down by Moses' hand? Passed to you? In Greek and Aramaic, Moses spoke? You vow it and it's so? That is your proof? Sire, who's the fraud? He cannot prove God wrote these words, how then...? (with relish) Can you call him here and lock him in a cell and bid him write another book - as you demand of me to demonstrate my thirty years' long labors writing tragedies and comedies and sonnets?

**KING**

(trying to shake off his drunkenness)  
You would equate gods given word with yours?

**WILL**

These thirty years I've done his work and played him out for all. Equate, not I, but you enact a god-king, sire, as though 'twas you

alone came down from highland heaven making so-called Britain out of nothing.

**BACON**

Enough with rhetoric. You'll not indict this king with angry words.

**WILL**

If not I, who? Not you! I am accused of falsely claiming poetry. Here is a king who falsely claims divinity. (re: Bishop) This is a man who rudely claims to represent God's charity and hope. (re: Sexton) And this, a serpent bombast, claims a God he will admit he cannot comprehend dictated to a desert madman this great book of holy terror.

**BISHOP**

Such presumption, sire, demands immediate execution.

**WILL**

At last this writing God at the king's command has loos'd my inner voice, my tongue's untied.

**BACON**

(helping the king to his feet)

Beware the cost to he who let's out verbal snakes and toads?

**WILL**

Nay, more! The desperate, poetic dragons I have had to tether.

**KING**

(pulls away from Bacon, teetering)

He thinks me king of Tyre claiming godness; you think you, wise Ezekiel, biblic prophet come to punish my presumption, promising death. I shall contend with you.

**WILL**

All the incautious truths that have rotted my entrails and sickened my sense of this world must out. I speak, sirs, O, I here do here speak with the very voice of godness.

**KING**

(confronting Will)

I am the anointed of god.

**WILL**

I care no longer who you are, for I am dying. Slowly, inexorably, angrily, horribly, painfully, wantonly, carelessly thanks to your pretended world of men who declare themselves noble and take, leaving those you term base-born to grub as best we can. Blessed are the wretched of the earth for they shall inherit your shit! And you have the devil's own gall to blame us for it.

**SEXTON**

Gaoler, take him to the dungeon.

Will grabs a dagger from the prop table and aims it at anyone who tries to touch him.

**KING**

You defy the king? I'll have your head cut off!

**WILL**

If you've the courage, do it now, yourself.

**COME, COME, QUEER MONARCH, KILL ME, KILL ME HERE.**

Will grabs the Gaoler's knife and tosses it to the King who thrusts, stopping just short of stabbing Will.

**WILL (CONT'D)**

For this syphlitic canker in my bowels is doing it more tortuously than could you yet devise, you pitiable excuse for a god. Now at last I'm free to say that I'm more god than you. Your so-called omnipotence is the feeble power to command the labors of others and diddle your favorites and send whoever offends your whimsic sensibilities to their death, while I, like a true god, daily create the hope, the dreams, the love, the magic... I people the world's consciousness with those who will live on far beyond your petty hope of immortality.

The Gaoler think the King has the trick dagger moves to take it.

**GAOLER**

Please, milord, you do not want to do in drunkenness, a thing....

One jab at his hand tells him it's a real one, and that Will has the prop.

**KING**

Hold your tongue. My God has blessed me for such righteous work. (to Will) Behold a king who's had to fight to keep his crown since he was but a wee Scots bairn.

**WILL**

And while the scepter and twin orbs of Scottish royalty sprouted between your spindly legs, your heathery thanes instructed you in viciousness(?)

Carr tries to calm the King; he's tossed off.

**KING**

God gave me the skills to deal with you.

**WILL**

Along with all the lairdish lusts you satisfy by the heedless sale of English baroncies and favors to such as your perfumed boy-knight.

**CARR**

Master Will, you...

**WILL**

O son...

**CARR**

I am no boy-knight,

**WILL**

You are, of an age as Hamnet, my once boy, my fatherless muse. You're but a Scottish toff, a lad whose own sad luck it was to have been nursed to health by a king's congenital need for pricking pleasure.

**CARR**

Sir, I....

**WILL**

But had you known he raised you to your courtly power just to serve him as the royal stiff-cocked leaning staff, what then?

**BISHOP**

Sire, I demand in the name of all that's holy...

Will rushes to the door and locks it.

**WILL**

No. You brought me here, so hear me out.  
Then send me to my fate, O envious priest.

**BISHOP**

(panicking)

Let me out!

**WILL**

I have not yet excoriated me.

**SEXTON**

Pray do.

**WILL**

I am most dire of all but speaking with  
The freedom of a god I now admit  
How willfully for years I have escaped  
Into illusion to avoid, deny  
The horrifying thus of my prescribed life.  
(a floodgate opens on a rush of self-discovery,)  
So fell a-feared of the baseness I was born to,  
I chose to hide in sound and color, all  
The magic horror of history, its illusions,  
Yea, of witchcraft and romantic cleverness.  
I sought the sense of aristocracy,  
And found nobility but in the heart of  
Wretched base-born, poor and... no, but, no...

The Sexton starts to speak. Bacon stops him.

**WILL (CONT'D)**

Still hiding from the terror, always hid  
Between the lines and blinded by the glare  
Of brilliant quips in verbal cascades.  
Why? To run from the fear of death, alive.  
I'm dead, if not to life then living in't.

Will is empty. All he can do is scream, a  
bloodcurdling "why" of a scream. Then utter  
silence.

**SEXTON**

Hang him.

**BACON**

Your majesty, he says he's dying...

**KING**

The man is dead.

The King grabs a knife. Will stands defiant.

**WILL**

I am so out of love with life and ready now for death, that I dare  
wish to be well rid of it.

**KING**

(taking a fighting stance)

Should I have you here and now?!

**EARL**

No!

The Gaoler shoves everyone out of his way and turns to the king.

**GAOLER**

Your majesty, you put him in my charge.

**KING**

And now he is in mine. And I will take him.

**GAOLER**

No king I've served could be so cruel. He bears no arms.

**CARR**

You said you came to save him, Jemmy.

The King, realizes he's going too far. He pats the Gaoler on the shoulder.

**KING**

Good turnkey.

**SEXTON**

I pray the king won't sentence you to death.

**BACON**

He must, by law.

**SEXTON**

But not until the rack has had the pleasure him. You stole gods' words and called it art. 'Tis time to suffer for your sins.

The Sexton moves threateningly towards Will who the Gaoler moves to guard, blocking the Sexton.

**SEXTON**

Give me my bible.

**GAOLER**

Stand away, sirrah, he is my keep.

Carr starts to interfere but hesitates when Will realizes the Sexton is reaching for the bible. Will grabs it, defiantly.

The Sexton slaps Will in the face. Will unflinchingly absorbs the blow.

**BISHOP**

Sexton!

The Gaoler grabs the Sexton's arm.

**GAOLER**

He is my prisoner.

Angry, the Sexton shoves the Gaoler at Carr and grabs Will.

**GAOLER (CONT'D)**

Not to be mis-treated.

The Gaoler struggles to separate them.

**GAOLER (CONT'D)**

Not by any man.

The Sexton is clearly out of control. Carr tries to stop him, but is pushed aside. The Sexton grab at the bible. Will pulls back. The Sexton falls. Carr helps the Sexton rise.

**GAOLER (CONT'D)**

Please, sirrah. My charge is defenseless.

Encircled, The Sexton grabs Carr's dagger as he's lifted to his feet and immediately sweeps in a circle, ending in a thrust into the Gaoler as he leaps to shield Will.

The King attempts to flee, but the door is blocked and fumbles with the keys, while Carr pulls the Sexton off Will. The Sexton swings around, stabbing Carr who falls back into the King.

**KING**

Robin!

The King feels then sees Carr's blood.

The Gaoler falls limp. The Sexton and Will stare at each other, aghast. Condell and Rice pull away the suddenly anguished Sexton who, realizing the enormity of what he's done.

He drops the knife and cowers onto his knees in abject supplication rapidly mumbling a mantra-like drone to blot out the overwhelming fear in his conscience.

**SEXTON**

I truly repent, I truly repent. Absolve me, O Lord, Absolve me, (frantically falling on the bible away from Will) for I believe in thee and thy mercy.

Will, Condell, and Rice try to help the Gaoler.

**KING**

My bible!

**SEXTON**

Forgive thee this most grievous offence; (kissing and hugging the bible as he darts around) and by thy authority committed unto me... Please, your eminence, absolvo mea (horrified looking at the bible, shoves it into the Bishop's hands) from this sin...

**KING**

(clutching his Bible)  
Francis, he's dying.

Bacon unlocks the door. The King, with Bacon's help carries Carr out.

**KING (O.S)**

Where's my physician!

**BISHOP**

In the name of the father and of the son and of the holy ghost.

The Sexton falls prostrate, but the Bishop lifts him, walking him out the door. Will struggles to lift the Gaoler's body.

**CONDELL**

How do we play this scene?

**EARL**

You won't get past the postern, not to mention all the gates.

Condell reaches for the bloody knife and points it at the Earl. Will holds him back.

Fletcher and Condell join Will and lift the Gaoler to their shoulders.

**WILL**

His grace will convince the Tower Lord his gaoler's taken ill?

**FLETCHER**

And the king insists we get him to the royal physician.

**CONDELL**

The king could have us stopped, and deny our tale?

**EARL**

The king won't want to admit he presided over...

**WILL**

The slaughter of innocence.

**SCENE 10 - HALLWAY OUTSIDE THE PRIVY COUNCIL CHAMBER - LATE NIGHT**

The Earl pacing the hall. Sound of debate behind the door to the Council Chamber.

One of the Earlsmen enters and whispers to the Earl, turns and leaves.

Bacon opens the door. The King and Carr, now leaning on the king's shoulder, come out of the chamber heading Left, not seeing the Earl at Right. The Earl turns to him.

**EARL**

Your Majesty.

Carr turns, sees the Earl and stops. The King hoping to avoid the Earl, keeps walking.

**KING**

Later, Har...

**CARR**

Your grace.

The Earl brushes past Bacon moves to Carr.

**EARL**

Once again, the king is nursing you to health.

**KING**

Robin?

The Earl moves to block the King from exiting.

**EARL**

Our investors are impatient, sire. Our investors...

**BACON**

**THE COUNCIL HAS DECIDED TO....**

The King moves to Carr who unties his own  
codpiece ribbon. The King avoids facing the  
Earl by tying it.

**KING**

I've had the bishop send the unfortunate Sexton to Canterbury.

**EARL**

The Archbishop knows of the... crime?

**BACON**

The Sexton has need of absolution for his sin.

**EARL**

Absolution.

**CARR**

But no trial.

**BACON**

The Bishop of London is the appropriate confessor.

**EARL**

Who is the dead man's appropriate confessor?

**KING**

God.

**BACON**

Is that why you are pacing the hall, your grace?

**EARL**

And who for his wife?

**BACON**

Haven't you already dealt with that matter? You are an earl.

**EARL**

That matter? And Master Shakespeare?

Bacon shrugs at the King. They've been arguing  
about Will. The King faces the Earl.

**KING**

Master Shakespeare! What am I to do, Harry? No king should have  
to...

**EARL**

It was anger... desperation. He is ill. He was falsely accu...

**KING**

No King.

**EARL**

He was provoked by a sanctimonious prig bent on destroying him.

**KING**

And made accusations against his most intimate friend, milord Harry  
Wroithesely. You, sir, who still have much to explain.

**EARL**

I don't think so, sire.

**BACON**

You don't think so?

**KING**

I had a dream last night, God warned me I was being seduced.

**EARL**

It was to balance the scales of justice. Sign the new compact, and let me lead the vote in Parliament to approve the funds you need, and I'll be off to my... to your new colony in America, harvesting your kingly share.

**KING**

Five percent is not what I would call a kingly share.

**EARL**

Another two percent.

**BACON**

Another ten, would be kingly.

**EARL**

Three.

**KING**

Five.

**EARL**

With five already pledged?

**BACON**

Ten percent.

**KING**

Done.

**EARL**

Who could deny his sovereign?

**BACON**

It is an appropriate recompense that will enrich his colonies.

**EARL**

And his personal coffers.

**BACON**

And their Overseer.

**EARL**

Vice Roy.

**KING**

Governor General.

**BACON**

An apt title - military and civil in one.

**KING**

Sir Francis will arrange a suitable ceremony for the signing.

The King starts out.

**CARR**

And Shakespeare?

**BACON**

He writes too freely to know what he believes. He has a blind faith in man's spirit that is unable to see, but seeks, the face of god. He wants the peace of faith, but his perceptions find it intolerable.

**KING**

Very clever, Francis. Thank god I'm not a poet. Well, so be it. You explain our decision to the Bishop when he asks. (takes the Earl aside) What luck with suppressing those sonnets?

**EARL**

All but five copies set to flame.

**KING**

(showing his copy)  
Six. Did you love him?

**EARL**

I have loved many people, sire, as have you.

**KING**

Did you...?

**EARL**

Some answers even a king must allow to god alone.

**KING**

Done?

**EARL**

We are.

**BACON**

Have the compact and your investors in the map chamber in an hour. From thence to Parliament.

They nod, turn, and exit opposite.

**SCENE 11 - CLERESTORY, ST. SAVIOUR CHURCH**

The funeral feast is being prepared. Will enters with pages and writes. The Wandman of St. Paul's approaches him, whispers. Will hands him money. The Wandman leaves, as Burbage storms in.

**WILL**

Go away.

**BURBAGE**

Where's your earl?

**WILL**

He's not my Earl.

**BURBAGE**

Without your Earl, the king will surely ban this company from court.

**WILL**

I spoke my heart, Dick, not yours.

**BURBAGE**

In the king's eyes, you are us, god save us. (impasse: decision) If you've lost us the king, you're out. And you forfeit your share.

**WILL**

It was "my earl" that got us all a share of this king's patronage, the six long years. (a burst of hushed anger) I was locked in gaol. Not you. (controlled calm) I'm sure he'll come. Be patient. He's an earl.

**BURBAGE**

Without the intercession of Southhampton we shall starve.

**WILL**

Afraid to work for your supper at this late date in life?

Titania with food and ale, approaches them,  
pulling Burbage away.

**TITANIA**

If you don't mind, Dick Burbage, he's composing a you-le-ghem for my Horvald, and I'd like it to be his best. So off with you.

Burbage angrily goes. Titania sets the food  
down and moves to the funeral flowers nearby.

The gravediggers set up *prie dieu*, kneelers,  
in the "next room" for the funeral service.

Will eats and sips, watching Titania.

**WILL**

I'll met at graveside, dear Titania.

**TITANIA**

My thanks to you for this, though sooner would  
I have him in my bed. It weren't you're fault,  
But O, how often did I say we'd rue your tongue?

**WILL**

He was too goodly-hearted for a gaol.

**TITANIA**

He was of soldier's stuff well made in's youth.  
'Twas war's hell wrought his angel's disposition.

**WILL**

He's God's gold shield now, as he was, and will  
Be, ever mine.

**TITANIA**

You saucy knave! You've no  
Belief in god, so mock me not, nor mine.

**WILL**

Why say you that?

**TITANIA**

You only come to church to bury yours... now mine.  
You boast of never paying tithe nor taxes.  
And rail against the priests?

**WILL**

But not 'gainst god.  
Would you, dear Lady, mock me of my sins?

**TITANIA**

You're lady wife should teach you god's good grace.

The Earl enters with two hooded women, helping each to a prie dieu. He offers to introduce them but they decline.

**WILL**

Perhaps, but she is not at hand.

**TITANIA**

And if she were?

I'd help her box your ears. Attend the earl  
And leave me to my columbine and rue.

Titania goes to whisper to the two women. The Earl approaches.

**EARL**

Master Shakespeare.

Will turns back to his writing. The Wandman comes again and whispers to Will. Will reaches for more coins.

**EARL**

Take this and bring him back whatever you've been given up to now.

Will goes to his writing. Ill-at-ease, the Wandman counts out coins from the Earl's sack. Will refuses them. The Wandman sets them down. The Earl waves him away.

**EARL**

I spoke to the king.

**WILL**

So did I. Not a very charmed experience, but memorable for that.

**EARL**

You said you were dying.

**WILL**

Did I?

**EARL**

Are you sick?

**WILL**

I am an actor, your grace.

**EARL**

Can we be serious?

**WILL**

I've tried being serious with you. It's too demanding.

**EARL**

I beg you, Will...  
I need to be free of  
the past.  
Our past.

**WILL**

Beg?  
None of us can be...  
can we?

**WILL (CONT'D)**

Or what? Back to the Tower and lock me up until...? Until I rot away, more than I already have?

**EARL**

I don't want to be a part of your sonnets.

**WILL**

Done. I am not sure you ever were. They're my private loves and sorrows, not yours.

**EARL**

Why did you let them be published?

**WILL**

Did I?

**EARL**

If not you, then who? (no response) I'm not comfortable with your sort of immortality. (no response) I bought up all the copies.

**WILL**

My sonnets?

**EARL**

I had them burned. In five years' time the world will wonder if they ever existed. One day you may be remembered, and thought of well enough, but now, you are to be forgotten.

**WILL**

This is a cruel goodbye.

**EARL**

You need a lover.

**WILL**

I've had lovers.

Titania leads the two women to the flowers,  
and they weave them.

**EARL**

It is your... You need  
to make as much of a lover  
of your wife as you can  
at your advanced age.

**WILL (CONT'D)**

Too many...  
and none well.  
My wife?

**WILL**

My age?

**EARL**

Yes. (taking Will aside) You are commanded to retire to Stratford, by the king. Or rot in the Bloody Tower.

**WILL**

I don't think so. Retirement, that's your sort of half-solution.

**EARL**

Better half, than....

**WILL**

In Stratford, (a passionate realization) I'll die. If not from boredom, then from the cloying clutches of my Puritan neighbors. I cannot live for long in Stratford.

**EARL**

You have no choice. The king will never see you, e'er again, on stage or off, nor hear your name, nor see your plays.

**WILL**

So says he now. He's angry, I don't blame him. He was paghetically sanctimonious, and I... I was a little harsh.

**EARL**

A little?

**WILL**

In three months he'll be sick of Marston's academical nonsense and Webster's deranged visions of evil.

**EARL**

He has a passion for Ben Jonson's masques. With you, the King's men, aren't. With you in Stratford they retain their royal favor.

**WILL**

And I get my wife?

**EARL**

Exactly. Go write a love scene with her.

**WILL**

She won't let me in the house.

**EARL**

I heard. So I brought her here.

**WILL**

My Anne?

**EARL**

To woo you back.

**WILL**

Here?

**EARL**

There. (gestures to the women with Titania) Weaving garlands for the dead and praying she may take you home again.

**WILL**

And away from you.

It takes a long moment to end 15 years of intense, emotional involvement.

**EARL**

An elegant half-solution, don't you think?

Hesitantly, painfully, the Earl forces himself to walk away.

**WILL**

(to himself)

O heart, my heart, hold fast.

Will pulls himself together and goes to Anne.

**WILL**

Mistress Shakespeare.

**ANNE**

Master Will.

Titania, sensing disaster, takes Will aside.

**TITANIA**

The night before he passed, my Horvald said,  
And here I quote his words seared in my heart:  
"If this great man of words, your Master Will,  
Could find in his fair wife but half the grace  
Titania gives to me he'd learn that loving  
Husband is a wondrous leading role for a man  
To play upon this worldly stage."

**WILL**

He didn't know Anne.

**TITANIA**

He had to learn to let himself love. And so must you. She is your  
Stratford heart.

**WILL**

Only if she were to me as you to him could I be to her as he was to  
you?

They hug, and Titania exits, taking the twined  
flowers into the church. Following her, the  
other woman, Judith, stops Will and whispers.

**WILL**

Judith?

**JUDITH**

She's prayed and fasted three whole days for god to keep you safe.  
Don't let her play the scene she's been rehearsing in her mind.  
She'll try contentious Rosalind. Give her an old, wise Romeo.

Will moves to Anne. Avoiding his directness,  
Anne moves away. Will follows her.

**WILL**

When I asked his grace to bring you....

**ANNE**

Twas his idea, not yours. And I said no.

**WILL**

Until?

**ANNE**

You were in gaol, again, and he said execution was some's wish.

**WILL**

I wonder why he never mentioned bringing you to London.

**ANNE**

I made him promise not to.

**WILL**

Ever?

**ANNE**

Only if the king should have your head upon a pike.

**WILL**

And now you're here. You are...

**ANNE**

What? No longer the love gift of your youth's heart? Aye. Nor you  
mine. I've grown not to expect it. Haven't you?

**WILL**

Perhaps, 'twas not to be.

**ANNE**

"To be or not?!!" which you once screamed at me upon an ugly night of drinking. How can that be your only question, sir?

Will takes her in his arms.

**WILL**

You are too clever, lady wife. You seek out truthes that don't exist.

Anne wipes Will face and smooth's his hair.

**ANNE**

Dear Lord, for a poet of such infinite awareness, I am so pained to see you groping sightless through the tangles of our life. Can you not find some new stage-tales to tell? Cease all these maddening sorrows and bitter terrors.

**WILL**

I heartily wish.

**ANNE**

You have too long displayed yourself before the public view.

Will embraces her, musing.

**WILL**

I know, my soft warm Anne, the fault's in me.

**ANNE**

You don't know where you stop and Hamlet starts, do you?

**WILL**

Hamnet?

**ANNE**

Prince Hamlet. Who do you write such things for, else?

**WILL**

A man is only what he makes himself. I left at thirteen vowing never to be anyone but me, and to remain my me, no other's. I would let no one alter me. Not mother. Nor Judith.

**ANNE**

Nor me.

**WILL**

My father bent to mother till he broke. Gilbert and Richard so become her church tamed mule-sons, wifeless in their bestial roles. Edmund... eager, but no strength. I hoped for Hamnet he'd be free of anyone's impos'ed mold or borrowed thought.

**ANNE**

And yet he died.

**WILL**

I had to guard the nature in me if I was to find the words that men and women use to build the different worlds each lives in.

**ANNE**

Then it is Hamlet own's your soul.

**WILL**

I need to own myself.

**ANNE**

And horde it all. Can you not sell a piece to me.

**WILL**

(a melancholy smile)

Make me an offer.

**ANNE**

New love. Not young, but new.

**WILL**

Sold.

**ANNE**

Should you stop writing?

**WILL**

And die? I write to visit all the new-discovered country in myself.

**ANNE**

Oh, Will, the more you seek your nature's wants the more you lose your natural state.

**WILL**

Uncanny wisdom.

**ANNE**

For a woman?

**WILL**

I know you think I have more love for words than women. It's not true. With you... I have to have more care, so my tears should never dare betray my fears or follies.

**ANNE**

Hear that? The sibilance and rhythm, the pacing and the rhymes. That's how you've hid your heart. From me. All our life. And that's the mystery in you I've always loved. I've no such mystery for you to love. (he starts to speak) My fault. I found adventure in a poet, then set out to keep him hearth-bound and his sweet word-mysteries for myself. I was, I am, too selfish.

Charmed by her confession, he tries to kiss her, but in public she's shy. He persists. She yields to the new promise in a kiss.

## SCENE 12 - NAVE OF ST. SAVIOR CHURCH - IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

A grave dug out of church floor. The casket on a frame over it. The mourners enter, pass the casket and sit. The Earl pays the gravediggers who exit. Shakespeare, with his pages, ink and quill, enters, embraces Titania, then moves to the podium behind the coffin. He writes, then:

**WILL**

I look at you and marvel at this throng,  
The vastness come to mourn him, Horvald, he  
Who let me call him Oberon. (fumbles pages) I am  
An aging poet forced to write my thoughts.

I've no glib words to fit with the occasion.  
 O Oberon, brave Oberon, you are  
 The shrewd and knavish gaoler of my soul.  
 And hold me still, as ever it will be,  
 For I'm an old fat fool, your grateful Puck.  
 Kind, caring Oberon... I fear no words  
 Of mine can duly honor the heroics  
 Of this man. (trying to grasp the idea) He gave his life for mine.  
 I'm here to praise this humble king  
 Of hon'orable men and bury here some measure  
 Of my guilt; uncommon husband, soldier,  
 Keeper of th'accused, rare, with true sense  
 Of duty, humor, never strutting - though  
 He did commit one sin that I have pardon'd  
 Him. He played me false, and I, a fool, believed:  
 He said he had no education. Lie!  
 He studied life uniquely, learned it well  
 And found himself to be a cheering soul  
 Within a body set in time and place.  
 He taught by action all he'd learned  
 With manly fond affection and compassion.  
 What cause? What cause can claim the right of this  
 Untimely death? No cause. No cause. (a sudden discovery) No! I  
 The cause that both are gone, a brother loved...  
 The youngest brother gave his too short life  
 To save the privacy of my most secret heart.  
 This sudden friend, gave his to save my life!  
 His life! A debt, a monstrous debt. And I  
 Have naught but words. My pen is foundling to  
 His fierce devotion. Kings and bishops, in  
 The baseless arrogance of their beliefs  
 Can only beg the god they worship for  
 One tenth of his embodied Christian honor.  
 Dear Oberon, adieu.

The Wandman pops up out of the assembly.

**WANDMAN**

'Baseless arrogance of belief?' 'The god they worship?' So, you are  
 an atheist, Master Shakespeare.

**WILL**

I'm not wise enough to be an atheist. Nor am I free to be one.

**WANDMAN**

Then you do believe.

**WILL**

In what?

**WOMAN**

In god.

**WILL**

He never asked. You're not god, are you?

**WANDMAN**

How can you even think such a thing?

**WILL**

Why don't you ever think such a thing?

Carr stands.

**CARR**

What did you mean, sir, you're not free enough to be an atheist?

**WILL**

Were those my words, Robin? Poor me. (tries to go back to his eulogy, but...) What I should have said is: I'm not free enough for the peace of faith.

**WANDMAN**

Faith costs you nothing!

**WILL**

Tell that to the Jews and Moors.

**WANDMAN**

You're neither a Jew nor a Moor.

**MAN**

He's a poet,

**LUCY**

And they're much the worst of all when it comes to faith.

**WILL**

Aye, if I'm to know the infinity of my imagination, I must pay homage to my nature's limitations.

**CARR**

I don't understand.

**WILL**

Neither do I, which is why I'm neither free to have faith in god, nor to deny him.

**WANDMAN**

Then you are an agnostic. (sitting) What a tragedy!

**WILL**

The tragedy is not being able to believe. I alchemize my word into people. Am I not duty-bound to live with their beliefs as I create them? Faith is the luxury of those who will not question.

**WANDMAN**

Question what?

**WILL**

Everything.

**WANDMAN**

You have no idea the world you live in.

The lights fade. In the growing dark:

**WILL**

Cheerless, dark, and deadly. But only when we fail to will it otherwise.

**CURTAIN**