

PART ONE

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 **James SAND**, 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. He 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 (CONT'D)

The 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) Oh, 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 advice.

WILL

Can this be me? Tis not? Oh, 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 in my heart...

EDMUND

A word?

WILL

It often, usually, always leads to woe.

EDMUND

Please.

Burbage shakes his head and storms out.

Edmund grabs Will's pen. Will turns to Edmund tossing
him a coin which Edward stares at for a bear, then...

EDMUND (CONT'D)

A mean reminder of the ten pounds, I owe.

WILL

(patiently sympathetic)
Ten? I'd forgot.

EDMUND

Put down your pen for once.

WILL

(back to work)
Go now.

EDMUND

I need to talk.

WILL

I don't!

EDMUND (CONT'D)

I do.
About your sonnets.

HEMINGES

Ned, We're trying to make
comedy here.

WILL (CONT'D)

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 country 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 (CONT'D)
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....

WILL
Home to mother.

EDMUND
No!

Will tosses a heavy purse at Edmund.

WILL
Here, then. Take it 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 weary, writes, saying his words to the audience)
My pen, this feath'ry prick, is my true tongue. And only when I've
plucked the ripe expression of my mind, changed, fixed and blotted,
can I be... content(?) Nay, no more, this tastes too bitter in my
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 given utterance 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?!

Drusella "TITANIA" Hamage, 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, you think?

BURBAGE

Where is it?

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?

CONDELL

From Ralph, off your desk.

BURBAGE

And this is it, Will? This?

WILL

It's not finished.

CONDELL

It's three weeks late.

TITANIA

Stop! Why must you be so rude? He writes and you complain. He re-writes, more complaints. Go to!

WILL

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

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
(to Burbage)
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 commands another comedy before Twelfth Night.

FLETCHER
The king's a drunk.

SLY
(to Fletcher)
He slept through half your
play.

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

WILL
Play Twelfth Night twice, he'll never notice.

Will tries to write.

HEMINGES
Not the play, Twelfth Night. The date - a new comedy just after the Epiphany, but definitely before the revels end.

TITANIA
Epiphany for our new king is more an orgy than a revel.

BURBAGE
Silence, woman!

CONDELL
A sot he may be, but this king's our sole support now that Will's rich earl's bedeviled by 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, so he can brag to his ambassadors that Will stole all the wittiest quips from him.

BURBAGE

You've made yourself 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.

Will goes back to writing.

FLETCHER

I told you his intent, but when do players heed their poets?

SLY

(snidely)

We thank you, Master Fletcher.

BURBAGE

(to Fletcher)

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

Heminges takes a script from Fletcher and hands it to Burbage. Fletcher moves to exit, but stops.

CONDELL

(quieting the men)

Wait. Wait. How does Will see this Timon of Athens?

WILL

He doesn't.

FLETCHER

As tragedy.

SLY

That doesn't work.

CONDELL

It reads as comedy.

WILL

Why?

SLY

Because our patron king demands 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?

They all turn to her, astounded at her dramaturgy.

TITANIA (CONT'D)

That's as... (feigning hauteur) That's as I see it.

BURBAGE

Oh, Tits, be still.

TITANIA (O.S.)

Don't call me Tits.

Titania, finished, walks off saying:

BURBAGE

The damn thing has no end!

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

(hoping to inspire Will)

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

CONDELL

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

COOK

Him?

SAND

What does that mean?

COOKE

He's never played nothing but maids and damsels.

SAND

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, and 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. This is a parody of King James with Sir Robert Carr, his catamite.

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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

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.

It's outrageous.

CONDELL/TIMON

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

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 such clever alchemy.

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

WILL (CONT'D)

In truth, these sweating, belching, farting fools these bold, contentious muses breathing fire, 'tis they that have drawn from my 'magination all the wordly wanton creatures of my mind. Three decades gone I am their hapless scribe, captive to their silly labors, still bemused, beguiled, yet gall'd that they have grounds and cause to mock my need to make their charming magick. But is it their ephemeral artistry that wins the penny groundlings to my verse? I need a dark, still den of tongue-tied time to parse it out but age hath neither grit nor pluck enough to lock me in that dank cell of my soul.

Burbage has brought order while Will was speaking and the Kingsmen clean up, while Burbage approaches Will.

WILL (CONT'D)

Lately now, my words are...

BURBAGE

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

WILL

(a flash of anger)

I will not powder the pimples of history to help an ill-made king believe he's half divine.

BURBAGE

Or make the poor sod love you for it. Yet you do it!

Condell sweeps around them.

WILL

The madness stutters me.

BURBAGE

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

CONDELL

Why madness?

WILL (CONT'D)

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.

Fletcher holds the bowl for Will to wash in.

FLETCHER

What's to be feared?

WILL

(mesmerized by the reflection of his face in the water)

Infection leaches from my pen, love's long drained out, all faith in man far gone and I a self-feared fool who cannot stop his wild, distempered, rash imagination.

Will washes his face and hands.

FLETCHER

(quietly to Will)

Flesh out the shipwreck Tempest play you dreamed.

The Players gather to take their leave.

SLY

Aye. t least we won't be mocking scoundrel kings. But when?

HEMINGES

Now to the Mermaid, eh? To drown your troubles, Will, straight way.

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

SLY

And since our effort's waste is 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

Just so. I've come to find your Will.

SLY

Looking for a Willie, are you?

HEMINGES

(untying Sand's codpiece)

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

WANDMAN

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

BURBAGE

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 who is picking up the bloody page. Titania gasps at the dripping blood.

WANDMAN (CONT'D)

What beckons may, I fear, be Death!

Will wipes blood off the page. The Wandman whispers in his ear, then runs out. Will drops the 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

(shouting after Will)

We're not having Edmund back again.

HEMINGES

Sold another of our plays, no doubt.

Everyone starts out.

TITANIA

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

BURBAGE

(about the bloody piece of paper)

Harry, what is that?

CONDELL

"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,"
"And look upon myself and curse my fate."

SLY

Who's blood?

Burbage has the actors changing the set as Edmund comes stumbling into...

SCENE 2 - A SIDE CHAPEL IN ST. PAUL'S, DEC. 28, 1607

He's running from the dagger of the **STEWARD**, a noble man's thug. Edmund's got a 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.

The Steward staggers on as bloodied and wounded as Edmund, holding his dripping dagger.

STEWARD

Give it.

The Steward swipes at the bundle, cutting 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, unable to stay clear of the fighting. Squaring off, Edmund's bleeding blinds him. The Steward 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.

Edmund stabs the Steward who drops the pages he's gathered. The Wandman is transfixed, trembling.

BISHOP	STEWARD
You're god's house keeper, Wandman, call the watch!	He that owns it names the use of it.

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 be stabbed.

WANDMAN (CONT'D)

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 cuts with pages.

WILL	WANDMAN
We need a doctor. Get a doctor!	You have to take him away. This is a church, not a...

EDMUND

Ohh! (a stabbing pain) Where am I?

EDMUND
I knew you wouldn't want
anyone to have them. To read
your private....

WILL
Shh, shh.
I should never have brought
you up to London.

Edmund gives Will the purse Will gave him.

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

WILL
Others, too.

Condell and Sand come running in.

EDMUND
He's had your Jude.

WILL
Has he?

EDMUND
Don't leave your Anne so much
alone with Gilbert.

WILL
Rest.

EDMUND
She'll blame you for this bloody work.

WILL
Mother...?

EDMUND
(nodding)
Not I.

WILL
Of course.

Edmund grabs Will for a kiss.

EDMUND
Remember me, with more of love than I deserve.

WILL
My heart is...

Edmund dies.

WILL (CONT'D)
No. 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 (CONT'D)

I met you first when I was new sixteen, and you three days, 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 sugar-tit in hunger for the one our worn and weary mother rarely tendered.

CONDELL

Will?

Church bell rings. Condell and Sand help Will up.

The Wandman leads guards in. They grab Will and drag him off. The Wandman tries to bless Edmund. Condell and Sand hold him off as they carry Edmund's body away.

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

SCENE 3 - THE BISHOP'S CHAMBER, ST. PAUL'S - EVENING.

The BISHOP of London, 49, enters 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.

The guards bring Will in and are dismissed. Condell and Sand rush in and huddle with Will.

BISHOP

(smarmy)

Take heart, my son, your brother is at peace, now.

WILL

(snidely)

He is worm meal.

BISHOP

Dust unto dust unto the last...

WILL

(in the Bishop's face)

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

BISHOP

Had he lived in god-fearing righteousness...

WILL

He lived in church-dodging freedom from priestly sanctimony.

WANDMAN

And died for mere words upon a page.

WILL

(suddenly guilty)

You think he's gone for so little?

BISHOP

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

CONDELL

(defiant)
Aren't they?

BISHOP

Death is part of god's heavenly 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 your god!

BISHOP

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

Will turns to Condell and Sands, then turns back.

WILL

(sneering)
I'll have him buried. Now!

CONDELL

Three days to Stratford, Will. We have a...

WILL

Here. Just where he is.

WANDMAN

Only a pauper's field would welcome him in London.

WILL

Here! In a consecrated grave.

WANDMAN

(outraged)
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!

WANDMAN

But it's 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 put it on display. How much?

Will grabs Edmund's dagger from Sand, spins around, to threaten a disbelieving Bishop. The Wandman whimpers in fear.

BISHOP

Perhaps there's space...

WILL

Within the Church.

BISHOP

... of the Saviour.

WANDMAN

The Church of the Savior?

Will looks to Condell for clarification.

CONDELL

Near the Globe, Will.

SAND

Not a stone's throw.

BISHOP

You don't know your parish church?

WILL

Like God, my busiest day is Sunday. (a negotiation) In the Sanctuary.

Shakespeare holds out the bloody bag of coins. The Wandman shakes his head. The Bishop takes the bag.

BISHOP

Done.

WILL

And now, sir, my 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 gestures 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!

SAND

Master Will.

BISHOP

You're already marked a murderer.

WILL

Then what have I to lose?

BISHOP

Don't be a fool!

WANDMAN

(in a tither)

You can't slay the Bishop of London in his own cathedral.

WILL

(grabbing the sonnets from the Bishop)

I've played the motley fool; the fashion fits my nature. And wouldn't such a death be just the answer to your daily prayer, make you a martyr like your Becket? I'll have the bloody pages.

Unseen by Will, the Wandman signals off and **TWO GUARD** with heavy chain and halberds appear. One lobs his chain over Will's head, around his neck. The other grabs the knife while holding off Condell and Sand.

BISHOP

(to Condell and Sand)

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....

SCENE 4 - GAOL CELL, THE CLINK, 1509/10

A dungeon cell with a cross-lattice wall. Two prisoners in rags, keeping their misery to themselves.

A GAOLER, late-30's, overweight, lumbers on as if he's 60. He unlocks the cell door.

GAOLER

Not pleased to put a true 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...

The Gaoler turns to "invite" Will, shackled, to come forward. Unlocking Will, the chain drop to the floor. The Gaoler bends to get them. 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 struggles, then chuckles.

GAOLER (CONT'D)

Didn't 'xpect such 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.

Using his dagger, the Gaoler gets Will into the cell.

WILL

Pardon?

GAOLER

My loving wife's your sewing lady.

WILL

Titania?

GAOLER

(startled)

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.

Gaoler moves prisoners away to clear space for Will.

WILL

(surprised)

You're her infamous Oberon.

GAOLER

Horvald, really. (having found a stool and a bucket, sets them near the door for Will). Mouthy woman, as certain you must know.

WILL

Why Oberon?

GAOLER

Had us a bit o' ruckus 'bout our little laddy-boy.

WILL

She never mentioned having a boy?

GAOLER

(tries but can't hold back the tears)

Wouldn't, would she? Died, at seven years and a bitter sweet summer. My fault. Beg your forgiveness, sir.

Gaoler searches for a stool.

WILL

No shame.

GAOLER

Saddest day of me life.

WILL

Pour out your grief.

Will thinks the stools for him, but the Gaoler sits.

GAOLER

We argued on the boy, my love and I. I wanted him with me, here, at my side, didn't I? She would have none of it. She got herself hot angry, 'n' cursed me as a wretched tyrant. "Not amongst those wretches." But like yer fairy king, I took him, damn the day. And she were right. The little lad, he caught his death and off one...

WILL

Had you no other child?

GAOLER

An angel of a lass; straightway she went to god from out Titania's 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. She'd seen yer play and saw in me your thieving sprite who took the foundling child.

The Gaoler yanks a ratty mat from under a prisoner.

WILL

And so she calls you Oberon.

GAOLER

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 since when she first started sewing up your hose and brings me once see your play of summer dreaming, and ever after I call her sweet Titania.

The Gaoler drops the mat in front of Will.

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

(turns to other prisoners)

You lot, you come with me. (to Will) Sorry, sir, I got m' rounds. (to the others) Come, let us leave this gent unto hisself. Him's poet to the king.

The Gaoler herds the prisoners out. After a moment.

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'll never 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, Fourth EARL of Southampton**, carrying two glasses and a crystal decanter.

EARL (CONT'D)

Will Shakespeare? (a beat) Well, my gentle poet in a bloody gaol.

WILLS

Harry?

EARL

(taken aback)

Harry?

WILL

It's been some time...
We did.

EARL

Yes, we did once use our given
names...

EARL (CONT'D)

... once upon a time. In private. (to the Gaoler) The key, warden,
the bloody key.

The Earl enters the cell. 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...

EARL

My fortunes in Virginia need attention day and night.

WILL

Only ever see you lurking in the shadows of the King's bedazzle
during court performances...

EARL

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

WILL

...peering at my plays with increasingly less-than-enthusiastic
grimaces upon your still surprisingly pretty face. You never stop
back after.

EARL

Yes, well, I have a family now.

WILL

I heard. I hope they are well?

EARL

(ruefully)

As family's go.

WILL

I warned you about....

EARL

You admonished me; goaded me, praising marriage. Seventeen sonnets.

WILL

Not for wedded bliss, for fatherhood, to pass on form and beauty.

EARL

Aye, and thanks.

WILL

Your mother paid me well for all the verses.

An embarrassed pause.

EARL

(slipping into the old familiarity)

I have been listening and reading the strange, much darkened moods and heros of your plays.

WILL

Ah. 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

Still memorizing my lines.

EARL

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

WILL

I heard your Lady mother's left us. I'm sorry for your loss.

EARL

And yours?

WILL

Not long for this world, I fear.

EARL

Fear? Once it was your heart's most ardent prayer - muttered smartly and 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, meandering in the sullen byways of *ennui*? Too intense for happiness. *N'est pas*?

WILL

My consistent intensity, you once told Raleigh and Essex, 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 sweet promises are spent?

WILL

Or spoiled. (bitterly) Or spurned. Enough old times.

EARL

Burbage thinks you're in grave trouble here.

WILL

You come at Burbage's request?

EARL

You, always so mindful of the law. Now in the dungeon of the Clink?

WILL

Your bishop's doing.

EARL

My Bishop, no. What is the crime?

WILL

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

EARL

Your brother?
Dead?
Sonnets?

WILL

Ours. To keep them from a printer's mischief. There was a fight and Edmund knifed. I was called to help, and like a luckless Romeo, I made the matter worse. Worser still - I was roused to slit a gloating Bishop's throat, but his thugs 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, still in his youth, died, bloody in my arms. I was her first and owed her, for her womb-time, more loving care of her last.

EARL

That's it?

WILL

For you there's even worse. The sonnets, those I wrote to give you immortality, your Bishop has them.

EARL

(stunned, tries to hide his concern)

How "worse" for me? A dozen and a half old poems on marriage?

WILL

And all the others. All.

The Gaoler enters with a note for the Earl.

EARL

The others. (realizes the implications) All the other sonnets?

GAOLER

Milord.

EARL

(hardly disguising his concern)

My name's not on those poems. Is it?

WILL

Why would I name my lov...

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?

No, it was...

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, to some ill-purpose, I've no doubt. He hates all players, mostly me as leading all of London to the gates of hell. In two day's time, he'll have me headless, and you in the Tower, 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 the Bishop's whim.

The Gaoler busies himself gathering trash.

WILL

(sotto voce)

Well if you can't, request this gentle turnkey. A fairer warden couldn't be found, true justicer of the underworld. He is my Oberon.

The Gaoler bends over the mat and farts.

EARL

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?

Will tries to see the note, but the Earl refuses.

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 boy 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. This, the coldest shadow pit of a sore and rabid world, where lords from

vanity fling fools to rot, and misbegotten monarchs shackle truthers in, as miscreants. O my brain, stop thinking! Sleep, sour poet. Penless, fool. Have ever I conceived a heart that can true love its fair if petty treasons grant?

SCENE 5 - LONDON HOUSE, ALDERSGATE - FEBRUARY 1608

The Bishop sits talking to **Donal Bray, 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. 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 a dear departed mentor's son 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

Twice? Strange you're still in London, Master Fletcher.

FLETCHER

Strange?

SEXTON

The raging plague has shut the theatres.

FLETCHER

It has.

BISHOP

He collaborates with William Shakespeare, so I'm told.

FLETCHER

You've been misled, your grace.

BISHOP

Your Shepherdess play was recently seen in his Globe.

FLETCHER

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

SEXTON

So you've never worked with him.

FLETCHER

I read aloud my pages as he hangs his costume. 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 verses.

BISHOP

What do you know of these?

The Bishop shows Thorpe the poems.

THORPE

Ah. (the blood startles 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)
Not till I've decided on publication.

BISHOP

How came you by this manuscript?

THORPE

By hand of a gentleman's steward.

What "gentleman?" **SEXTON**

Didn't say. **THORPE**

Describe him. **SEXTON**

The other dead man. **THORPE**

(advice to the Bishop)
Rack him. **SEXTON**

No. Please. **THORPE**

Have him flogged. **BISHOP**

Your grace. **THORPE**

The dedication thanks a Master W. H. **SEXTON**

Came with the manuscript. **THORPE**

I'll have the name. **BISHOP**

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

The Wandman is directed to lead Thorpe out.

(glancing through the sonnets)
The king thinks Shakespeare his best poet. **BISHOP**

Better even, as he should, than all the college wits who boast the education Will's not had. **FLETCHER**

Not educated? Will Shakespeare? And he's royal poet? **SEXTON**

Is the king displeased with these? **FLETCHER**

He hasn't seen them yet. **BISHOP**

(slyly to the Bishop)
Wouldn't he feel the fool to find that a flattering upstart in his royal livery is a degenerate pervert? **SEXTON**

FLETCHER

Degenerate...?

SEXTON

Pervert!

FLETCHER

(accepting for the moment the characterization, shrugs)

When was that sort of intimate indiscretion ever a problem for our new Scots monarch?

SEXTON

When it becomes public!

BISHOP

(to Fletcher)

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, with a family.

FLETCHER

(checks the pages)

I read no mention of an earl in these. Who might that be?

The Earl barges in, the Wandman huffing behind.

EARL

(brandishing the note; surprised to see so many)

Unannounced, as your note requested. (surprised) Master Fletcher.

BISHOP

Ah, milord.

The Bishop turns to the Sexton but decides not to introduce him. He holds up the poems.

BISHOP (CONT'D)

A hundred-fifty-odd sonnets, by William Shakespeare.

SEXTON

You know them, of course?

EARL

Is this why I've been summoned? And who are you to ask?

SEXTON

Donal Bray, Sexton.

BISHOP

My legal advisor in matters ecclesiastical.

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?

SEXTON

They cut sharply to the heart. Dedicated to a Master W. H.

EARL

(lifts the pages)

Are they?

SEXTON

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

EARL

They're mine reversed. I am Henry Wriothseley.

SEXTON

Reversed, a clever and 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,

WANDMAN

Aye, it does.

EARL

But Will's name upon a page gives no assurance he authored the work.

SEXTON

(emphasizing the Earl's apparent familiarity)

'Will's name?'

EARL

Can you prove these are from his pen?

BISHOP

He demanded their return.

EARL

Perhaps they're KingsMen property, bought off some cash-strapped errant fool for pint of ale.

WANDMAN

The claim was fifteen pounds, six, and five.

SEXTON

You think a vagabond like "Will" is capable of such writings?

EARL

Vagabond? Master Shakespeare wears the livery of the crown.

BISHOP

Thanks to you.

SEXTON

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.

EARL

Many's the Oxford graduate who has accomplished less.

SEXTON

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

BISHOP

My note requesting your presence here, 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.

The Earl shrugs.

SEXTON

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

EARL

I had no need to ask, nor reason. I knew 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 when 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 he may have been in his youth, William Shakespeare is 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 Southhampton 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

(pointing to the manuscript)

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

That's true. (shrugging at the Sexton) 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 unless someone saw him pen in hand. But then, your grace, neither can he.... (thinking hard) If he can't prove these are his work, what can he prove? What has he written? How claims he to be poet to the king?

BISHOP

What matters that 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

Our arrogant king is more perverse than anything in these.

The look at each other, acknowledging the dangerous implications of their plotting.

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 how it ipso facto robs him of his self pro-claimed divinity.

BISHOP

Donal, we are clerics of the 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, and seize the Canterbury crown.

BISHOP

But first the proof.

SEXTON

Let me rack the man.

BISHOP

The king alone can grant such daring measures. He's 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

Donal! 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, but worriedly.

SCENE 6 - 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.

Sand 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 Condell)
He was not. Now that Sly's gone to judgment...

COOKE

Master Burbage.

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

BURBAGE

It goes to John. (to Cooke) What?

No one sees Will and Fletcher enter in conversation.

COOKE

(intimidated, tries to make 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)

Here's bad news from Mistress Anne for all.

BURBAGE

(seeing Will, pockets the note)

Will!

COOKE

She gave me this to give to Will.

HEMINGES

(slapping Sand's head)

Master Shakespeare, to you!

BURBAGE

(to Will, pocketing the note)

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.

SAND

(insinuating a racy affair)

French landlady, hunh!

TITANIA

I would.

Vulgar, but agreeing laughter all around.

TOOLEY

I say we'll never see another scene from Will.

TAYLOR

He sold the poet slave he's long kept shackled to his desk doing his verse, to silence the landlady.

BURBAGE

You're out of the Clink months now, and what've ye done? Shit. Not even an end to Timon.

SAND

More important, how is it a prince like Will is cursed with such a she-wolf as his Anne?

Playfully, Will reaches for Sand, his fist ready to slug him, but Condell holds him off.

WILL

Like God, Lucifer takes his pleasure toying with a man's heart. Who's got the news 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 any time 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

Aye, sir. Mistress Anne, she sends word if you set out soon upon this season's tour, (scrunching his eyes and stiffening against the anticipated blows) yer not to think yer welcome in her house.

Everyone "Ooo's!", then as Will glowers, they stop, 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

(a put down)

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.

BURBAGE

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

TITANIA (CONT'D)

Why d'ye pick that name?

WILL

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

BURBAGE

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

TITANIA (CONT'D)

(sotto voce to Will))

Shoulda knowed he'd tell you that one.

Will grabs at the note, but Tooley passes it on.

TITANIA (CONT'D)
 (still privately to Will))
 Felt bad he did, to have you
 there even for a night.

HEMINGES
 Many's the time she claim
 rights to do with it as she
 pleases.

Taylor makes a paper bird of the note.

TITANIA (CONT'D)
 He's posted to the Tower now.

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

WILL
 Won't get him a better class of prisoner.

Taylor flies the note over Will's head. He stops.

WILL (CONT'D)
 It's the whores ye bastards bring, and your filth she dreads. I
 warned you.

BURBAGE
 Oh, we are welcome, Will. (catching 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
 (threatening)
 You dare say that to me, you impertinent imp?

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

Will is speechless. Slowly laughter builds.

WILL
 (dismissing it all as a joke)
 The woman can't write.

The laughter bubbles over into a roar.

BURBAGE
 (holding out the flattened 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 written those honeyed sonnets to Mistress Anne, she'd be
 sweeter to you, friend. And the Bishop's Sexton wouldn't be digging
 dirt to open up your grave.

Sudden silence.

HEMINGES

The Bishop of London?

FLETCHER

Set the dogs on Will, he has. It's true. (attempting a jest, as "one of the men") Could it be your brother Dick's been writing all the works we think are William Shakespeare's?

WILL

(snapping)

He'd have no trouble writing yours.

The men sense a challenge.

FLETCHER

It's your affection, not my writing's, being challenged.

The company laughs jeeringly.

Will moves away, lost in Anne's note.

BURBAGE

Hold on! You're saying, the Bishop doubts Will's writings?

FLETCHER

He's angling to close the public theaters permanently, and thinks to ruin Will's repute the quickest way.

Everyone mumbles wondering why.

HEMINGES

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

The Kingsmen hoot and holler believing they deserve the money more than the church.

Titania takes a mug to Will.

FLETCHER

He's got his bulldog Sexton making inquiries.

The Lights focus down into Will speaking to Titania. He drinks.

WILL

How shrewdly doth my shrew become a shroud. Else why'd she send these cutting words? This missive is derision and 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 now empty mug) No more!

She goes with the mug to Burbage for a refill.

WILL

Thus be-girded, one near day, she'll glumly lay me in my smothering grave, her sighing for my swaddled demise. What hand-wove 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, I think, must 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 to play?

WILL

Our wives. Our women.

BURBAGE

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

WILL

What can I do?

BURBAGE

Go to her. Take her. Have her. Let her have you. Want her again.

SCENE 7 - 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

Well now, Bacon...

BACON

Sir Francis to you, sir!

SEXTON

Can you tell by reading who wrote that?

BACON

(choosing his words)

What I can't tell is why you bring me this, and 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! The king's command. 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 line.

SEXTON

Where? How can you be sure?

BACON

Behind each twisted metaphor and turn of plotted purpose. Here's the contradictory heart of living men, as one alone can give it breath.

SEXTON

You cannot be mistaken? You see this man you call Will Shakespeare is...

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

SEXTON (CONT'D)

Uneducated, base-born...

BACON

(with vehement disdain)

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

SEXTON

(unsettled by Bacon's continuing apparent loathing)

It is suggested, you are 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

Britain's shame!

The Sexton goes.

SCENE 8 - 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. His is to habit drunkenly leaning rather too intimately on the broad shoulders of **Sir Robert CARR**, an amoral 19 year-old. But just now, the King and Carr are giggling, for Carr is trying to tie a ribbon on the King's codpiece.

Shocked, the Bishop turns his back, waits a moment, then, impatient, turns his head to speak.

BISHOP

Your majesty.

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

KING

(with a dense Scots brogue)

Bishop? (giggle) Oooo! (sharply) What now, damn ye?

BISHOP

You sent a messenger - 'come immediately.'

KING

Did I?

CARR

(whispering)

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 King's codpiece, as if to say, "nice and tidy, now." The King kisses Carr and reads the deposition.

KING (CONT'D)

(reads)

"Did hear some talk of Master Shakespeare's "wit-tinged madness." Remembered that one, liked the words. Saucy fellow, this. Who is he?"

BISHOP

An informant.

KING

(reading the deposition signature)
Horvald Hamage?

BISHOP

My gaoler of the Clink, at the time he gave this deposition. Now, somehow, he is your gaoler! In your Bloody Tower.

KING

Indeed. Well, Shakespeare is our poet, ain't he, that one?" "Wing-tinged madness," that's Master Shakespeare to a nonce, this Hamage fellow's got an ear, he has. (reads on) "And then a few words 'bout the Bishop and...." What words?

BISHOP

Personal references not deemed relevant.

KING

(reads on then:)
Is this all? I've gotten more out of a roast pig.

The Bishop starts to explain, the King raises a hand to silence him.

KING (CONT'D)

Words are like knives, your grace, ye bloody well gotta prod and probe, then cut to the bone. Your toadies have much to learn in the art of interrogation. You must send them round betimes to watch me work. Bring them with you to court next time. (reads more) I see nohting about an illicit the relationship!

BISHOP

(pointing to the nme on the deposition)
This is a report of words between Shakespeare and Henry Wriothesley.

KING

(pointedly)
So? They're friends.

Again the Bishop starts to speak and is stopped.

KING (CONT'D)

Go away now.

CARR

(reminding)
Your new bible.

KING

My new Bible? Ah! Did you bring it?

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

KING (CONT'D)

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.

Carr and the King snicker at the joke.

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. (reading his Bible) Master Will's the best. (about what he's reading) He'd never be as clumsy with the words of god as your academics. No, no. The god who speaks through me must speak with eloquence. Go away, milord Bishop.

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.

CARR

(indicating the Bible)

Why not set your poet to fixing this?

KING

Ah, my love, you are a genius.

SCENE 9 - 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.

A Beat later, the Earl enters behind Bacon who merely stops, then reads on.

I'm alone. **EARL**

So am I. **BACON**

And thirsty. **EARL**

Drink. **BACON**

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

And starved. **EARL**

Eat. **BACON**

Very late for business **EARL**

BACON
(turns to watch the Earl a moment)
Tell me, my young and oh, so eager earl, what game is this you're playing?

Game? None... yet. What is your pleasure? **EARL**

Master Shakespeare. **BACON**

Will? Believe me, he's no game. **EARL**

Then why are you playing him for a fool? **BACON**

I've hardly seen him... **EARL**

BACON
The Bishop of London's man offers you in affirmation of 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 peruses the poems)
'Sblood!
Published?!

BACON
In which he has revealed more
of 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 ethical.

EARL
How long?

BACON
A few days? Sunday, I think.

EARL
Did your "friend" say where he got it?

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

EARL
(alarmed)
This isn't the only copy.

BACON
The law allows a thousand to
be pressed.

EARL
This is...

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

EARL
He said no others' 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 get the book. Bacon holds on to it.

EARL

These could so ruin... everything.

The Earl moves 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, with but a week to preclude a parliamentary debate and get the King to sign it.

Bacon grabs the Earl's genitalia, squeezing 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. For this a whimsical king will be accommodated? And a once beloved poet cast aside?

EARL

What do you imagine these poems seem to say?

BACON

Seem? Nay, madam, not seems. No matter what it seems. Your enemies will make your seems a fatal flaw. Of course, you could deny these, too. Like Peter denying Christ, you seem to have convinced the churchlings...

The Earl sheaths his dagger. 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, 'tis said, you've paid to have them prove that 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. The bishop's dog will strike at anyone. The Bishop's purpose is to shut the theaters, 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 the Scottish burr we've 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 does it cost an earl to destroy a lover-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 politics and moral deceit, revile.

The Earl hoists the singed pages as Bacon picks up his books, exiting.

BACON

Milord!

The Earl storms out.

SCENE 10 - THE GREAT ROOM, NEW PLACE, STRATFORD

JUDITH ("Jude") Shakespeare, 23, enters with an overflowing basket of foul papers. She lights a candelabra and one by one glances at then 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 bring 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

How could 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 fiery 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 a well-kept daughter.

JUDE

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

ANNE

That wouldst not move a court to any sanction against him.

Enter Will, gnawing a chicken leg and guzzling ale, filthy after a hard ride.

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!

You are...

Thomas Quinney, one day will...

Anne 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 (CONT'D)

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 Judith)
What suit then have you for a court, my snarling daughter?

ANNE

Judith, do your chores.

JUDITH

Father, could we...?

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

Will goes to the table, looks at what was 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 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 my house thou gavest me. Not thy home.

WILL

Don't play at words with me. And you will please not parse your
pains with your 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 here 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) A day's hard ride 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 sought.

ANNE

But 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 forced my da to make me marry you. I told you then I wouldn't stay in earshot of ma 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

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? Gone 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 knighted clod...

ANNE

O Will!

WILL (CONT'D)

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? 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!! (a 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 plan 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. (a thought almost overwhelming) Burying my youngest brother. (pulling himself together) Why did you write 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 made-up play.

WILL

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 an over-cherished innocence.

WILL

Not lost. Not hid. Remote, perhaps...

ANNE

From where you root your heart.

WILL

(looking into her eyes)

From whom, which whom is a place I cannot ever truly leave.

ANNE

Then why...

WILL

I have a craving I cannot ignore for the far beyond of anywhere. I need the boundless 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 won't be crammed into such an eggshell as the world you're haply mistress of? London's more than a three day ride from Stratford, Anne. 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. Your silences, colder. Since...

WILL

Since 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!

He puts his feet on the table. Anne goes out to see to Judith.

WILL

My brave Anne, sits nightly, knitting niggling don'ts to knot this wooly heart and tie it to the altar of her hearth, swathed in wedded shame. She calls this what? A wifely duty done? Was't ever love? Twas rash. Twas quick. Twas sweet. Her once autumnal rainbow, now seen arc'd o'er my length of life, is an opaque mantle of far from fond affection assayed by her every gossip's damning word. And yet, this ever present musky scent of womb.

After a moment, Anne re-entered, gets a poker from the fire and jabs it at Will, but then into his mug, to heat mulled wine, slams the mug on the table for Will, then sits and knits.

WILL (CONT'D)

So you've read my plays.

ANNE

Some.

WILL

Found you much to like?

ANNE

To learn.

WILL

Tell me one thing.

ANNE

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

WILL

Why think this family? I use no names. What is it riles you?

ANNE

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

WILL

Forcefulness and spite.

ANNE

(slaps 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

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

WILL

Do you not find in Lear amazement?

ANNE

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

WILL

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

ANNE

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

WILL

Or hearth-bound clod - a hearth Anne hath a way of reigning o'er as Bess once ruled. 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 then than now. You knew I gasped for new adventure as for air. Admit it, woman, please. In truth, you cheered when I rejoined the Queen's men far away in Lancaster, hard on our Susie's birth. You sent me off the day o' the twins christening, your curse ringing in my ears, "Thou art naught but 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 soft 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 life fantastical, 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 dead memory gets more care from you, than he did 'live.

WILL

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

ANNE

And not your ma?

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 earth, his 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 or bond. 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 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 you were Lawyer Snuggle's clerk in seventy six.

He's is overwhelmed by what appears to him as a "new" Anne, a mate rather than a drudge. He kisses her.

WILL

Portia played a ploy, 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

That same dread thought first came to me 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, being locked in. But then your note, and out of my home am I 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 Southampton's livery, burst in.

EARLSMAN

Master Shakespeare, you will come with us.

JUDITH

Da! I told them not to...

ANNE

Who's this?

WILL

You are Southampton's men.

They grabs a hold of Will and lead him out.

EARLSMAN

You were advised to keep to London, sir. An earl's...

WILL

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

EARLSMAN

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

ANNE

Judith, call the watch!

WILL

No, Judith. Leave my fate to me.

The Earlsman lead him off. Anne comforts Judith.

SCENE 11 - SOUTHAMPTON HOUSE, THE STRAND.

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

The Earl is reading when the Earlsman enters.

EARLSMAN

In the 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 more back, milord.

EARL

You chased him to his home?

EARLSMAN

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

EARL

What is it like? His home?

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 (CONT'D)

(reading a sonnet)

"A woman's face with nature's own hand painted,

Hast thou, the (dismayed) 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 (CONT'D)

I never thought it'd come to this.

WILL

(controls his irritation)

What's this?

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-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.

WILL

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

EARL

I had to, for your own...

WILL

Safety?

EARL

What matters now is saving you.

WILL

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 doesn't 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

For all to gaggle on.

WILL

The Bishop's had my handwrit pages 18 months, a deal to guarantee no publication. Printed (checks title page) for Tom Thorp?! That diseased and indigestible lump.

EARL

You had no hand in it?

WILL

No.

EARL

You didn't grab another pound to passify your Stratford shrew.

WILL

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

EARL

William Herbert, 3rd Earl of Pembroke, and seven years my junior. Pretty lad. Is he your master mistress?

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

How does a country bumpkins write of a lord with such offense?
"Master-mistress!"

WILL

Better by far then "bed-boy."

The Earl snarls.

WILL (CONT'D)

It was our joke: you wearing the dress you stole from your mother's closet, me brandishing your father's sword? How can you, Harry, treat your once "so much beloved" poet with such hauteur'd hate?

EARL

Harry? (unsheaths his sword) You crude arrogant lout! (leaps at Will)
Where comes the gall to speak to an Earl with this familiarity?

WILL

(fights back with the massive candelabra)

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

EARL

Sleeping off a drunken revel, nothing more.

WILL

You said formality was not a fitting tone 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 said 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 plated 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 the King's Men's, that's how I gave you your eternity. 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 my "eternity."

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

(remembering)

I did! 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's councilors, his continental embassies, and such as hold the purse strings James needs loosened.

WILL

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

EARL

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

WILL

Not author of my plays? Then who? But, wait, if I'm the author, I'm a pervert and he's embarrassed? If I'm not the author I'm... what?

EARL

According to the bishop...?

Lights up across the stage, on...

SCENE 12 - THE KING'S PRIVY CHAMBER, WHITEHALL

The King is being fitted by a HABERDASHER for new clothes, offered choices of colors, material, jewels, etc.

CARR

The scarlet, I think

The Sexton is uncomfortably trying to hold the king's attention as he proffers depositions which a much annoyed 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 man who sits 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 sets the groundlings doubting.

BISHOP

The Master of the Revels' now reports, sire, riots from the theaters spilling out into the streets, the idle 'gainst good order.

The King signals for the Earl to enter.

BACON

(slyly into the king's ear)

I should, your majesty, point out that in our Parliament your bishops hold the balance of 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, unwittingly agreeing to put his name on works by a better-educated, highly-positioned leader of a court faction bent on destroying the monarchy... (grasping for breath)

BACON

Or?

SEXTON

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

EARL

He is a gentleman, sire.

SEXTON

(outraged)
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, who has been listening, stops te haberdasher
and turns to the Sexton.

CARR

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

A stunned silence, abruptly ended by.

BISHOP

The matter turns upon the sonnets' much loved youth, I'd say.

SEXTON

To learn the name of the nobleman of these sick sonnets, sire, requires a royal warrant.

KING

A warrant?

BACON

The player is a member of your household, sire.

KING

(turns to the Bishop)
Milord?

BACON

He must, by law, be first arrested, 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...

BISHOP

Written by a godless heretic, subversive of your church -

SEXTON

He is a papist, sire, I'm sure of it!

KING

^{astounded)}
And now a charge of popery?! (to Earl) Another conspiracy?

SEXTON

If only I'm allowed to question him.

KING

Another plot and this with death by poetry?! Am I again to save the nation?

EARL

Will Shakespeare makes it his business to stay away from politics.

BISHOP

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

EARL

I have.

SEXTON

All of them?

KING

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

Carr's more interested in ruffs and ruffles,

CARR

^(to the haberdasher)
The blue ruff, don't you think, sire? Figure-of-eight folds?

SEXTON

Sire!

HABERDASHER

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 said often times 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

Sire, the queen's Danish 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.

BISHOP

Feasting a foreign papist, sire?

KING

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

BISHOP

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

CARR

Does someone question his majesty?

SEXTON

London is a den of spies, sire.

BISHOP

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

CARR

Fitness?

KING

What is he saying, Francis?

BACON

He's saying to back Shakespeare is to hand your enemies a dagger. What he's insinuating, 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...

No, no no.

CARR

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

SEXTON

Many are envious of a Scottish brow adorned by the English crown.

CARR

And 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 within 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

Might you be the lover, sir?

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 Shakespeare seems ... 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 declared 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

Shakespeare 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.

EARL

You don't have to.

Everyone turns to the earl.

EARL (CONT'D)

I have him.

Stunned silence.

KING

Where?

EARL

Under guard at Southampton House.

KING

On whose order?

EARL

In anticipation of yours, your majesty. And such a meeting as this.

A tense moment.

KING

Lock him in the Tower!

SEXTON

I will report every word he...

KING

No. I've experience at cross-questioning.

EARL

The Tower, your majesty?

BISHOP

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

KING

I shall get the truth of him.

The King marches out with the other following, except the Haberdasher, left holding his taffeta. The Earl returns to...

SCENE 13 - SOUTHAMPTON HOUSE, HOURS LATER.

Writing, Will eats. The Earl reads the sonnets.

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. I feel such things.

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

Or about yourself.

It is humiliating.

Why do you say such things?

But...

But write...?

For everyone to read?

EARL (CONT'D)

Not till I've finished reading them.

WILL

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

EARL

Please.

WILL

In your bed, hiding under the quilts against cold that 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. You cannot have forgotten how it felt to be lost in love, yet now you want the words to sound like something less than true.

EARL

They are open to much 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... 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 this.

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 ever to 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! You think I'd want this foul crude version of my loves and losses 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 purpose anew) And when they've all been burnt, what then of me? (realizing) The King wants the name of my fair friend, my golden youth, aye? And our mutual mistress?

EARL

You must 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. I harvest now my own divinity - out of an imaginative depth bred in my soul in the years of you. 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 dry clod of the icy earth you will one day spill o'er my grave.

The Earl, emotionally moved, tries to speak. He can't. He signals 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**SCENE 14 - 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 (CONT'D)

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 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 ye remember.

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

GAOLER (CONT'D)

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

WILL

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

GAOLER

Just gimme a minute I'll clear 'em.

The Gaoler grabs a broom from near the door.

GAOLER (CONT'D)

(looks at Will in disbelief, 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, an' 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 - Scotland, huh! 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; 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.

He unlocks Will, and prods him to go in.

GAOLER (CONT'D)

If I may, sir. 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.

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

Don't let her in.
Jesus wept!

GAOLER (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

Mistress Bedwarm, I presume.

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

GAOLER (CONT'D) 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 (CONT'D)

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

MARGARET
Good night, kind turnkey.

WILL
What's this?

Sign here. A deposition. Sign what?

MARGARET

I need your surety that I am not this Dark Lady you've so passionately and cruelly cursed on in your sappy sonnet book. If my husband ever finds someone to read these sonnets to him...

WILL

Dark Lady? You, Marge? How could you even think such a thing?

MARGARET

(hands him the quill)
Course I was, before the earl took money as his mistress. Put your mark to it. Swear by god's own grace...

WILL

I'll swear to nothing.

MARGARET

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

Don't I know it's not my heart you wish to sooth.

WILL

You've come for a good long poetic fuck. And I will give it as you wish.

He blows out the candle. After a moment...

KING (O.S.)

Open up, Gaoler!

GAOLER (O.S.)

Your majesty?

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 log.

GAOLER

Right away, milord.

KING

Out!

The Gaoler leads Margaret out. She gets the deposition and curtsies as she passes. She shushes Carr from revealing who she is.

KING (CONT'D)

I canna fucking sleep, and when I canna fucking sleep we watch the moon and wonder, don't we Robin? 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.

CARR

Harry Wroithesley, 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 flesh of gifted men. But my bishop...!

CARR

He wants you out of your theater.

KING

And out of his, too, laddy, you must know.

CARR

His Sexton's gathering evidence...

KING

To prove you're not my playwright - as I have told the world.

WILL

Good thinking.

KING

I'm trying to be fucking charming, poet.

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, to prove me not your playwright? I'm on display five afternoons a week, plague not with-standing. 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 fair copies sent tomorrow.

CARR

A new play.

WILL

I have the beginnings of two upon my desk. With a warm fire and a large pot of ink, I'll read you a new one in a month.

KING

Sooner. This will be done before my new parliament sits.

CARR

A week at most.

KING

And on a theme of my devising.

WILL

I don't write themes, milord.

CARR

And in here.

WILL

In here?

KING

A bonnie solution, eh?

CARR

A bold defense.

WILL

What do you mean?

CARR

What would it prove, you let out to do't? 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, says he, you've had writing the plays you're accused of stealing.

WILL

Stealing? The Bishop and this Sexton accuse me of thieving poetry? Thus did Pontius Pilot accuse the 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 fucking Tower. And in a week!

WILL

A week? In here?

KING

You are my poet, groom to my privy chamber. You write me fine plays 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 take down for me. I'll have no friend dictate this new-made play. Gaoler?

GAOLER

Aye, your majesty.

KING

Wait upon his needs at every minute.

The King staggers and almost falls, but with the help of Carr and the gaoler starts toward the door.

WILL

My liege, I...

CARR

The Bishop says his Sexton's found clear 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. The them's to be...

CARR

Your king and his rights divine.

KING

Exactly! The holy labors of my kingwork.

WILL

But, sire, your new law, forbids the presentation of any living high born person on the stage. Yourself, especially.

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 it illegal and writ by royal command?

KING

Turnkey! Paper and ink.

GAOLER

Aye, majesty.

The Gaoler goes off for the paper and pen.

KING

I'll look in from time to time...

CARR

We're off to Hampton Court in the morning, sire.

KING

Back before dawn.

CARR

(shaking his head)

The 21st. The day before the parliament next convenes.

KING

I'll have it then, and not a day later.

WILL

But, sir, a whole play?

KING

It's a whole week.

WILL

Sire, tragedy requires more than a week.

CARR

Not this one.

The Gaoler hands Carr the ink and a quill, smoothing out a piece of foolscap he wrinkled.

KING

I will not have it rumored my royal poet's a thief who puts his name on another's work. I exalt your All's Weels and Much Ado's to the crowns of Europe. I gift them quartos of your Hamlet and Lear. Aside from going on a hunt, my plays are my only...

The King takes paper and pen and writes.

KING (CONT'D)

(as he writes)

Pleasure. 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?! 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. Start now, please your king, or pay the price! Prove we are the greatest 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 (CONT'D)

I'll not be played a fool, Master Shakespeare.

The King grabs the pen and leads Carr to the door.

WILL

No, sire. A tragedy, the divine right of the king, but in a 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 will read your pages on the 21st.

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 power and glory, 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

Write me a play of Lord Jesus as King of Heaven appearing to an anointed king of earth. I have inspired myself. 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. Fix my Bible.

The Gaoler unlocks the door. The King exits. Will opens the new Bible.

SCENE 15. 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) Give me... illumination! I must write the king's 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)

O, 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

Sweet Lizzie? I have known her. 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

Why you?

CARR

I think you are as grossly used as I.

WILL

Grossly used, milord?

CARR

You by your foes. 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 choice flows 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) that bring 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 needing of a god compelled to make his own imperfect world in search of solace. He wants a play. Four hours of clashing poetry. This rampant poetry, I've come to see, has been my weapon in a war 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 soul's soured blood, spills out its 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 16 -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) Another "Dark Lady" 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 you'd have proof you're 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 would 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've little 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.

WILL

Father?

WOMAN

(revealed as Judith)
We were afraid you'd not be well when the Earl's Men...

She moves to warm him in her arms.

WILL

Judith! God's wounds!! How could you speak to me as now, you errant daughter? (sees to the Gaoler) I've you to thank for this, have I?

JUDITH

How speak you as you have to me, neglectant parent? Remote husband!

WILL

Why you and not your impatient mother?

JUDITH

Ma's sick worried, but denies it.

WILL

How came you here?

JUDITH

The Earlsmen took you, so I first went to your Earl.

WILL

You spoke to Wroisthsely?

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's more like it.

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.

Why is that? **JUDITH**

I, I, I have no faith. **WILL**

Everyone has faith, da. **JUDITH**

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.

O da! You've many yet. **JUDITH**

You don't understand. **WILL**

Make me. **JUDITH**

No. Go, Please. **WILL**

He embraces her as a goodbye, but she won't let go, the warmth and comfort of her soon overwhelm him.

WILL (CONT'D)
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 - each night. 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.

They 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, again, 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 his ache by walking out.

WILL

You've got your mother's saucy ways and sassy tongue.

JUDITH

I've 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 (CONT'D)

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

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

He is 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. I thought you'd 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. Please, go now.

Will embraces her with all the love she's longed for.

EARL

He'll be drunk, and offensive and dangerous. 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.

SCENE 17 - 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, is mentally rewording the King's Bible, pen in hand to capture a satisfactory phrase.

The Gaoler leads in the King who's sipping a cup of wine, Carr with a jug, and footmen with comfortable chairs. Coughing, Will works on.

CARR

Master Shakespeare!

The King sits and drinks, kissing Carr.

Bacon and the Bishop with attendants.

Everyone 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.

KING

Late!

EARL

Sorry, sire, I've brought players to perform your play.

The Bishop quietly glowers at an impervious Fletcher.

BACON

Except it's not been written.

WILL

No.

SEXTON

(secretly pleased)
He's failed. And I am proven right.

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.

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 Shakespeare! (gulps, calling for wine) More.

The Sexton starts to speak. The Bishop stops him.

BACON

So what does this mean, Bishop?

BISHOP

The poet is unmasked: a player and a fraud.

The King rises.

KING

My play has not been written, Harry. Your Virginia Compact won't be signed.

As the King moves to exit, the Sexton swoops in for the kill.

SEXTON

And now to rack him. (to Will)
Who's the rebel who wrote the works you've claimed?

KING

No pillaging my America this year, laddy boy. That was the bargain!

BACON

Sir!

The King and Carr have gone.

BISHOP

(to the Sexton, rushing out)
Bring your evidence!

BACON

(sotto voce to Will)
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!

The Earl runs out, after the king.

WILL

(shouting after the Earl)

Harry, that was half a life ago. The quick and easy flow is choked.

CONDELL

No, Will, not twelve months since. Stop playing petulant anger.

WILL

I wrote those poems of him in a midsummer dream.

Fletcher directs CondeLL to help him move the table, set up the ink, quill and paper.

FLETCHER

You forget last summer at the Mermaid. The Lawyer Krink. Recall him settling cases in the Tavern, the one about a thief?

CONDELL

(to the Gaoler)

Get the Earl to bring the King.

The Gaoler rushes out.

FLETCHER

Let the King be Lawyer Krink to you; your muse.

CONDELL

You made from it a scene in seven minutes. Tops!

GAOLER

Your grace.

The Earl appears.

EARL

Will? A play? Or Tyburn Hill?

A play.
CONDELL

But you must help.
WILL

I cannot write two lines of doggerel.
EARL

He'll do the poetry. You get them talking.
FLETCHER

Talking? What about?
EARL

WILL
(handing the Earl the king's warrant)
I've no idea. He wants to hear how god will speak to him.

God?
EARL

How am I to write that?
WILL

FLETCHER
(to Will)
Many's the king I've watched you play.

CONDELL
And you always parade around 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
(to the Earl)
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 whispers to a much displeased Bacon.

BACON

(turns to the Bishop, loudly)

As counsel to the crown, I ask the charge.

SEXTON

The King knows the charge. He made it.

BACON

The law allows that...

SEXTON

Only the King need know 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, your majesty?

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 ghostly 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 seen only by his and the Gaoler's minds' eyes.

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

And you said what?

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... (drinks more)
My play.

BACON

Yes, sire.
Harry?

EARL

First, let us have the Sexton prosecute his charge. (interrupting the
Sexton before he can 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

(frantic)

You are mistaken, sir. I've no such document.

EARL

'Tis best. 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, true?

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.

SEXTON

There 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.

KING

Where is my play?

SEXTON

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 - in mime - as Will, speaking the following, direct. 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 sadder
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 roiling thund'r of madness.
Once! At last! Let mine own sound and fury reign!

CONDELL

Will!

FLETCHER

Enough.

The Earl and the Sexton have interrogated 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 jumps in.

WILL

Thinking, sire.

BISHOP

Of what?

WILL

How to compose the play the king demands.

SEXTON

How?

Will, Fletcher and Condell wave 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's god?!" It is against your law, my liege.

KING

<y lord Bishop, it was my command, and since I am the law...? (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.

BISHOP

Rude arrogance!

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 to carr, half a page) And being here so few, sire, may I ask you to portray your toyral self?

KING

(surprised and delighted)

Portray myself? In my play?

The Gaoler returns and hands Carr the wine. He's dragged into the players' huddle.

WILL

(filling the king's cup with wine)

You are the hero, sire. It is your play.

The King nods and gulps, as Carr is thrilled by what he reads. Condell and Sand douse some lights, move others to create a ghostly LIMBO.

KING

(gulps the wine and pours more)

Who better me, than I?

FLETCHER

(aside to Will)

This play's the thing wherein you'll clear the conscience of a king?

Condell snickers, Will merely glowers.

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 if I waste your humble patience, let

Seeing an intrigued and excited King being covered in
rags and cobwebs, the Sexton begins to object. But
Will stops him.

WILL (CONT'D)

Your earthly verdict quickly use that axe
That has been long your church's free-thought tax.

Condell hands Carr his role.

CARR (PROLOGUE)

O, for the inspiration Heaven promises,
Some means to rouse the muse of magic making,
To summon up, within this dank dark cell,
The vasty fields of a kings' ambitions, the acts
Of Earls, and a Bishop's hope for sainthood.
The loss of Limbo left the wronged awaiting
Their fell time, and nulled the reign of...

Shakespeare, stops Carr, and scratches out the last
two lines, then gestures start from...

CARR (CONT'D)

To summon up, within this dank dark cell,
The vasty fields of a kings' ambitions, the acts
Of Earls, knight's politic, and a Bishop's hope
For sainthood.
Concede me only, in this stony space,
That I may conjure now the guiding winds
Full force from angels wings; bold, brash
And bitter passions burnished 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 "rehearse?"

Will hands the king his "role." But before he can
read it, as Penitent to encounter the Archangel
Michael (Sand) and Mephistopheles (Condell).

Condell directs Fletcher, Carr, and the Gaoler to
light and move candles to create an aura.

Meanwhile, the king is undressed and re-dressed
which, he being drunk, becomes a tussle. All the
while, the King shushes the disapproving Bishop.
Though daggers and swords are being wrestled over and
precariously juggled, the King is so inebriated he's
enjoying the danger and the alarm of his "audience."

WILL

Wouldst speak these lines, my liege?

KING

When do I appear?

CONDELL

As fits a king, you'll be escorted thence.

The King gulps down another goblet of wine as Will moves into the darkness. When "the play" begins, only mere glints of Will manipulating "ghostie" things will mark his continued presence.

WILL

Act One, Scene One - The nearly dark twixt night and dawn. A being of light floats in the vacuum of a nightmare; then sees the approach of a spectre, dragging a lump of flesh.

Will nods to Condell who leads the King to center.

NOTE: In what follows, all the characters are, each according to his rank and relationship to the others, shocked or pleased at the things Will has written which they must speak. Including the Gaoler who says nothing but reacts to everything.

ARCHANGEL

(pulling his sword)
Halt! Who comes unbid to this lost province of the living dead?

MEPHISTOPHELES

(to Archangel Michael)
Wrong, sir, not unbid.

ARCHANGEL

What hast thou there, bold Mephistopheles?

The Bishop is horrified, hearing the King referred to as "what?" misinterpreting the King's drunken flailing about as suddenly sees "ghostie" spirits in the air.

MEPHISTOPHELES

Well met at locked-up Limbo Gate, (snidely) brave celestial, Michael, prince, archangel, and warrior spirit.
Your Lord God bid me bring this penitential Soul.

ARCHANGEL

Bid thee, defeated devil-servant?

MEPHISTOPHELES

Aye?

ARCHANGEL

Who was't when earthbound tell me?

MEPHISTOPHELES

A King anointed, James the Scot.

The King curtsies deeply, slopping his wine.

ARCHANGEL

Why so?

MEPHISTOPHELES

We of the netherworld ask not for reasons, though 'tis at's death was set for Hell, being here suspended in a poet's verse.

SEXTON

Poet, indeed!

BISHOP

My liege, this is blaspheming
fantasy and worse, to you...

KING

Nay, nay, ye blithering toss
pot.

The King raises a hand to silence them.

BISHOP (CONT'D)

Ill-suited insult and abuse.

KING

(aside to Will)

Hast writ, brash poet, my
final judgment here?

From the dark, no response, only Will's hand is
visible, gesturing for Condell to press on, as
haunting sounds and movement of the "ghostie" stuff
increasingly entrance and distract the King as "his"
play develops.

ARCHANGEL

Bow thy head, and kneel, dead penitent!

WILL

(sotto voce, to the King)

Speak now, dead penitent.

KING

(aside to Condell)

How does one play a dead man?

MEPHISTOPHELES

(dropping character)

Think hell, instead of earthly pleasures seek.

The King, distracted by ghosties, wriggles in his
chains.

ARCHANGEL

How like to Jacob doth the wretch beseem.

(to the King)

Art anxious now to wrestle with Lord god?
Which art thou?

WILL

(to the King)

Speak, my lord.

KING

Ah... eh... My words, where are my words? uh... Aye!

MEPHISTOPHELES

Once the king of the British Isles,
This is the ragged dis-embodiment
Of a gross usurping, arrogating ...

Again, Condell rattles the King's chains.

KING

(having no line, speaks as himself)

Nay!

My crown is mine by godright. Ne'er usurped.
And more, my flesh has drunk the holy balm

Of majesty. I am th'elected deputy
 Of god. And all the accusations hurled
 By men at me, are wafted 'way by god's
 Just angels' wings. And who can stand against
 The hosts of heaven's glory? I am divine!

Mephistopheles stops the King with another rattle.

PENITENT (KING)

(to Mephistopheles)

Where'st led me? Speak. I'll go no further.

MEPHISTOPHELES

Nowhere art thou now, nor wert thou e'er,
 But in a boyish dream, and a poet's verse.

ARCHANGEL

(to the Penitent)

And as thy sceptre'd church denieth Limbo.

MEPHISTOPHELES

Aye, just so!

ARCHANGEL

Nowhere thou wilt remain till judgment's serv'd.

MEPHISTOPHELES

O, that God commands, fore'er, that thou carouse
 In sulph'rous air and soul tormenting flames...

ARCHANGEL

Or be in time-bound purgatory cast.

The king half listening, someone has to tap or poke
 him when it's his cue.

PENITENT

No hope of heaven? (drops character) Indeed, is paradise lost?!

ARCHANGEL

Poor king, bend now thy mind to wise perceiving.
 And hear th'eternal future I unfold.

Sands is afraid to utter his next line.

PENITENT

Speak. (a beat) I will hear it.

Will prods Sands to go on.

ARCHANGEL

Thou art a sorry spirit, royal fool.

The Bishop and the Sexton move to interrupt but the
 King, straining to comprehend, sternly holds them at
 bay and holds out his goblet to be refilled. He then
 offers it to Sands (for "courage"), who shyly takes a
 sip. The King smiles drunkenly to encourage and downs
 the wine.

ARCHANGEL (CONT'D)

At best, art doom'd a certain term to wander
 In this dark abyss, till foul crimes done
 In life are full pronounced and justly purged.

The Bishop whispers to the Sexton, unable to hide his
 secret pleasure in hearing the king thus vilified.

MEPHISTOPHELES

Nay, to burn! To know the secrets he has hid
 In his mind's prison-house, the full tale told,
 Such sins would harrow e'en angel's souls, and freeze
 life's blood.

KING

O, Robin, Robin, more, more, more... 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 and looks for lines on his role while
 drinking.

PENITENT

Speak on.

BISHOP

Your majesty...!

ARCHANGEL

Thou must be penitent, bereft, and shamed,
 Which qualities your living never knew.

MEPHISTOPHELES

(grabbing the King's chains)

Hell hath full right to this malignant soul.
 Would he had been as grand a king as he
 Was great a sinner. Yet, did he out-devil
 Even me. Else why am I called forth?

ARCHANGEL

Thou asks?

MEPHISTOPHELES

Demands!

ARCHANGEL

(checking his sinners list)

On's knees, his prayers desired to be true,
 But being weakish, lame, and trouble-kinned,
 'Twas eas'ly tempted by the lures of hell
 From these ill-couns'ling, predatory trolls;
 Hence God himself now deigns him judged anew.

KING

'Tis fitting, fitting, poet. God, himself
 Must judge for through this priest was I by God
 Anoint.

MEPHISTOPHELES

(to Archangel)
 You know not half his sins or you'd concur
 That he is meant to Lucifer in hell.
 For undeserv'd is he to look upon
 That godly face that I've been long denied,
 For simply claiming justice.

ARCHANGEL

At the tip of heaven's sword.

MEPHISTOPHELES

Yet he betrayed the laws of heaven by
 His judgments and forsook his work ordained.

Will, in the dark, rattles a gong.

ARCHANGEL

Turn away. He comes.

Disallowed the face of god, Mephistopheles looks away
 covering his eyes with his hood, as "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.

MEPHISTOPHELES

O Lord, what warrants this proceedings? Sinned
 And unrepentant died this wretch.

KING

Not so.

GOD

Nay? Thou didst assume on earth the place of god.

ARCHANGEL

And used His ordained priests immodestly.

Smug, the Bishop is suddenly secretly pleased with
 accusations against the king.

KING

(embarrassed)
 Alive I...

MEPHISTOPHELES

Thou art dead!

ARCHANGEL

And thy soul hovers now in jeopardy.

KING

How did I die?

MEPHISTOPHELES

A gutless man, poor soul, despairingly.

ARCHANGEL

And didst not even think to pass with Jesus'
 Name upon thy lips.

KING

I did! I did! O, didn't I? I will.
I promise. I, I meant to. Jesus wept.

GOD

O sad and troubled monarch,
happ'ly dead.

KING

(dazedly trying to make sense of
his scribbled script)

My play..? 'tis strange,
these rude words... Please, I
am lost.

GOD

Aye, king, gravely lost, and so I am come to thee.

KING

(overwhelmed)

As in the dream of Solomon.

The King suddenly believe this his final judgment.

GOD

Tell me why thou didst deign to claim my rights?

KING

My life, as it was lived, began in 'jeopardy.'
My father killed, my mother prisoner of
Her cousin queen, and I, I an infant prize,
A stuttering babe, a powerless font of power...

(looking around for Will)

Aye, poet, aye; an infancy of dangerous privilege...

(downing wine, trying to focus on reading his
lines)

The signatory amulet of rights
Both royal and legitimate, fought o'er
By plotting thieves and warring lordlings bent
On bending Scottish knees to a harsher view
Of heaven than a youthful heart could heed.

(again searching for Will)

How came you, poet, knowing this, all this of me?

WILL

Speak on, my grateful liege, and op'n your heart.

KING

(reading)

Three masters hated, one loved, ere ascending
Scotland's throne,

(gulping down wine)

To Master my own land...

MEPHISTOPHELES

But not your lusts of boys.

KING

And lose the love of one
Sweet soul. Thou cruel and noxious fiend,
What care I 'bout the gender of affection?
O god of mercy, flesh though gav'st me, yea
And fleshly needs that... (suddenly lost in regrets)

BISHOP

Stop, your majesty, this prisoner was required
By your decree, to prove of his claim of art,

Not conjure painful memories of your much
Misfortun'd past.

KING

Hold fast, Lord Bishop. All that's said, I've heard,
And more, yea, worse much worse than love
A lad. But better love what comes than never
Love at all?

BACON

The king's request was for a demonstration
Of the poet's claim to authoring his plays
By bringing god on stage to account his
Well-anointed king. And so he's doing.

MEPHISTOPHELES

But how? By wording a play-god with the king's
Inhuman slaughters of the soul.

ARCHANGEL

(check his list for something good:)

Yet, lord, he kept the peace!

MEPHISTOPHELES

With tricks and lies!
His rude, uncouth behavior, want of heart,
Neglect and hate unnatural, foul, and strange.

KING

Haste me to know how I might prove my love.
And grant me time to sweep all sins away.

GOD

There once upon a time was one weak king
Plantagenet, whose filthy sins of lechery
And most abominable adultery didst burnish
All his acts and lead to his uncrowning.
Both Scot's and England's crowns, you kept, and yet
Like Richard Second, someone more deserved it.

KING

More deserv'd? Pray, who? I'll give it him.

GOD

As my first born is the face of all my godness,
Your first born...

KING

Charles?

GOD

Doth merit more your throne.

SEXTON

(to Bacon and the Earl)

My lords, how can you let such lies be spoke
Unto his royal majesty? That he is drunk
Is true, and that he made to feel regret
Sure makes him vulnerable to this poet traitor.

PENITENT

(requires a moment to comprehend what he reads)

Why sent to this account with all my pricking
Imperfections on my soul?
(searching his past)
I did but seek to soothe...

MEPHISTOPHELES

With vengeful acts
That wronged the poor and raped the helpless land.

ARCHANGEL

And curs'd, thou claimed god's rights!

Seeing the King bereft, Shakespeare points out the
Penitent's next line on his pages. But the King
shakes his drunken head, refusing to say the words.

KING

Such unaccustomed thoughts now plague my mind!

GOD

O, what a falling-off hadst thou, sad king!

MEPHISTOPHELES

Sunk to an incestuous, vile adulterate beast,
Used leperous witchcraft, thou didst use thy power
Wicked to seduce and took abed
(indicating Carr)
This innocent, abused his flesh and fed
Thy shameful lust and shameless pride on him.

ARCHANGEL

How, like a poorly 'prenticed player, thou
Didst crouch beneath this crown like a serpent coiled,
And feign thou didst, a seeming-virtuous king...

GOD

And god!

KING

O, horrible!

MEPHISTOPHELES

And all the while caroused and prey'd on innocence.

KING

O, horrible! most horrible!

MEPHISTOPHELES

What reckoning, lord?

As Will, ceremoniously hands the mace and a robe from
the Gaoler to Carr, the King grabs the pitcher of
ale, and guzzles desperately.

KING

What things are these?

GOD

Th'eternal prizes for deserved fate:

Carr proffers the mace.

SERAPHIM (PLAYED BY CARR)

A crude clawed mace as used by Christ's dread torturers.

MEPHISTOPHELES

To pierce the flesh with blood-holes, each for a sin
Committed, each one gushing out foul, rancid
Blood that dyed the ocean, fouled the air,
And stained the land thou swore you would keep fair.

KING

(horrified)
And that?

Carr proffers the robe.

SERAPHIM

The gilded robe of Heaven's Glory crowned.

ARCHANGEL

Adorning kings who for their stately wrongs
Didst make amends to find forgiving peace.

GOD

Which thou? Speak, king, how be thy equity?

KING

I've earned the robe.

MEPHISTOPHELES

Nay! God, be bound by heaven's justice, strike!

ARCHANGEL

Or not?

MEPHISTOPHELES

Let me. I'll use this cruel claw
As he most lib'rally used it while he lived,
And preached 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.

WILL

God can.

EARL

It is a play, your grace.

SEXTON

He is no God.

WILL

Are you?

SEXTON

I do not claim to be. I am his priest.
I labor for the glory of...

WILL

No, fool,
You are the bitter minion of a most
Ambitious wretch pretending to God's love.

The Sexton clutches Will by the throat.

The Gaoler moves to stop the Sexton, but Will
indicates for him to stay away.

WILL (CONT'D)

(near choking)

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's.

The King drunkenly struggles to re-enter the fray,
as, the Bishop tries to pull the Sexton away.

Again, the Gaoler moves to pull the tangle of men
apart, but this time the Earl holds him back.

WILL (CONT'D)

(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; who preaches
Christian virtue while he practices
It's sins, vain sloth and gluttony, but most
Of envy, jealous as he is of players,
They who earn their meagre bread by art
And bringing the truth of rank and power t'the fore.

The Gaoler watches, pacing anxiously, afraid to touch
the King, as Carr and Bacon try to help the King
break free.

BACON

(to Will)

Where found you gall to risk this play of peril?

WILL

In truth's omniscient eyes, O, crafty, brave,
Star Chamber clerk, Sir Francis, who alone
Has risen on his merits and demerits,
The backstairs adjunct of a crown, of any crown.

(sotto voce to the King)

Twas he, sire, spoke and argued twas most
Politic, the Queen should execute thy regal mother.

The King roars against the implied challenge to act.
The Earl jumps into the fray. The Gaoler is
panicking.

EARL

Your majesty, please come away and sleep.

With Carr's help, The Earl frees the King, who Carr holds up, as the Earl moves to free Shakespeare from the Sexton's clutches.

EARL (CONT'D)

(sotto voce)
You do grasp what you're doing, Will.

WILL

Now speaks another gem of thy jew'll'd court
Liege, Harry Wroithesley, noble Earl, who tempts
Thee with new ventures in Virginia wilds.
Beware this master of seductive greed,
Doomed 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'd
Rebellion. And when old Bess was fina'lly gone,
Like that one (Bacon), ran to suck your God-tit dry.
A such a one as does abandon love for fame.

The Bishop tries to slap Will's face, but the Earl blocks him. The Bishop moves away to exit.

BISHOP

I'll hear no more of... you!

Will holds the Bishop close.

WILL

You will!

BISHOP

Your majesty.

Will directs the Gaoler to lock the door.

WILL

You brought me to this moment, hear me out. Then send me to my fate,
O envious priest.

BISHOP

(panicking)
Gaoler!

WILL

Not even to hear me excoriate myself?

BISHOP

The key!

WILL

A priest cannot refuse to hear a man confess.

BISHOP

You are in dread?

WILL

I am most dire of all; for, acting here
The freedom of a god, I come to see
How willfully for years I have escaped

Into illusion to refute, deny, avoid
The crippling life prescribed me at my birth.

(a floodgate opens on a rush of self-discovery,)

So damned a-feared of the baseness I was born to,
I chose to live in words and dreams, in all
The magic horrors of history, its illusions,
Yea, of witchcraft and romantic cleverness.
I read the library of my Lancashire Lord;
And studied everyone I ever met
The peasants and their betters rank by rank
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, but Bacon stops him.

WILL (CONT'D)

Still hiding from the terror... Hiding? Yea.
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.
(drained, all he can do is scream:)

Whhyyyy...!

KING

Why what?

WILL

Hath nature bred the sense
Of god within my heart, and yet breeds such
As you to drag us to our desperate graves?

SEXTON

Hang him.

BACON

Your majesty.

KING

The man is dead.

WILL

Again, the king presumes God's judgment his,
(re: Bishop and Sexton)
As do these with their false divinity?

BISHOP

Unruly, king! How reign upon a throne
If cannot rule well even o'er thyself?

KING

I can. I do. O Robin, speak for me.

CARR

I have no lines nor acts to play here, liege.
But would remind, you sire, you loved this poet once.

KING

I did.

BISHOP

Stop this.

And still...?
CARR (CONT'D)
KING **BISHOP**
 I do. Guard!

Then let him live!
CARR (CONT'D)
KING **BISHOP**
 I will. Gag him.

Will grabs the king.

WILL
 (a desperate warning plea)
 O regal sinner, ill-anointed king,
 Thou'rt cursed to have thy name forever used
 As a witch's chant and for millennia
 To roam the cesspools of the land by day.

The Bishop holds back a seething Sexton.

WILL (CONT'D)
 For whence thou diest, thou'lt drag thy gilded cross
 From a craven church's hidden Calvary,
 And set it sail upon the seas of time
 Yea, every night thou shalt re-dig thy grave
 Right where the land you feed off meets
 The tides your people weep, their salt sea tears
 Will wash the sand each dawn, re-fill your grave,
 And so obliterate your footprints whence
 No mark of you remains.

The King grabs a knife. Will stands defiant.

WILL (CONT'D)
 No hint in history,
 Of your king-work, nor of you, your mis-spent life.

CARR
 My lord.

KING
 I am the king. I execute him now, myself.

WILL
 I am so out of love with life and ready
 Now for death, that I dare seek to be
 Well rid of any hope.

KING
 I grant thy wish!

CARR
 Please, sweet lord, you do not want to do in drunkenness, a dev'lish
 sore and murderous 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. God
 gave me the skills to deal with such as this.

To calm the King, Carr; who leans heavily on him.

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

WILL

Master Will, I am no boy-knight. O son...

WILL (CONT'D)

You are of an age as Hamnet, my once boy, my fatherless muse. You are 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?

The King makes a feeble lunge at Will.

EARL

No!

The Gaoler, fretting round the edges of the drunken knot of bodies, is compelled to take control, but Condell and Sand hold him back.

GAOLER

Majesty!

The Gaoler pulls away and shoving everyone out of his way, turns to the king.

GAOLER (CONT'D)

You put him in my charge.

KING

And now he is in mine. And I will take him.

GAOLER

No king I serve would be so cruel. He bears no arms.

CARR

You said you came to save him, Jemmy.

The King tries to clear his head, staring at the Gaoler, tapping him on the shoulder.

KING

Good turnkey.

The Sexton breaks free of the Bishop and moves threateningly towards Will. The Gaoler blocks him.

SEXTON

Stand away, old fool.

GAOLER

Sirrah, that is my prisoner.

The Sexton moves toward a defiant Will, who clutches the Bible,.

BISHOP

Donal!

The Gaoler grabs the Sexton's arm before he can strike.

GAOLER

He is my keep.

Angry, the Sexton shoves the Gaoler away and lunges at Will, but the Gaoler struggles to separate them.

GAOLER (CONT'D)

Not to be mis-treated, not by any man.

The Sexton is out of control. Carr tries to stop him, but is pushed aside. The Sexton grabs at the bible. Will backs away, letting the Sexton fall towards him.

GAOLER (CONT'D)

Please, sirrah.

Carr tries to help the Sexton rise.

SEXTON

Don't touch me, catamite!

The Gaoler helps the livid Sexton.

GAOLER

Please, sirrah. My charge is defenseless.

Seeing himself encircled, the Sexton uses the Gaoler to pull himself to his feet, grabbing the Gaoler's dagger as climbs. Immediately he sweeps in a complete circle, ending in a thrust directly at Will but stabbing the Gaoler who has leapt to shield Will.

The King attempts to flee, but the door is blocked and fumbles with the keys, while Carr and the Bishop pull the Sexton off Will. The Sexton swings around, slicing Carr who falls back into the King.

KING

Robin!

The King feels then sees Carr's blood.

The Gaoler has fallen limp against Will. The Sexton and Will stare at each other, aghast. Condell and Sand pull away the suddenly anguished Sexton who, realizing the enormity of what he's done.

The Gordian knot of bodies slips apart as Bacon and Carr disentangle the King and drag him to his chair,

The Sexton 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 repent, 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.

KING

My bible!

Will, Condell, and Sand try to help the Gaoler.

SEXTON

Forgive thee this most grievous offence; (kissing and hugging the bible as he frantically paces) 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 The Earl's help, carries Carr out.

Where's my physician!

BISHOP

In the name of the father and of the son and of the holy ghost.

The Sexton runs out through the door.

Condell and Sand tear off their costumes. Will hoists a lance and candelabra in his outstretched arms, embodying the godness in the cell.

BACON

You fool. You least of all should dare compose A play to tell a king god's truth?

WILL

If not I, who? Not you! I am accused of falsely claiming poetry. But by the king's command, the voice of god's been found within, my tongue's unloos'd the desperate, dragons I hitherto have had to tether.

BISHOP

You think yourself wise Ezekiel, biblic prophet, come to punish my presumption, yea? I am god's ordained priest.

WILL

I care no longer who you are.

BACON

Shakespeare.

WILL

For I am dying.

CONDELL

What?

WILL

Slowly, inexorably, angrily, horribly, painfully, wantonly, carelessly.

EARL

What means this?

WILL

Much thanks to your pretended world of so-called gentlemen who dub each other noble by the sword and rampant ravage o'er the land, yet deign to leave those termed 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 ballocks to blame us for it.

Will grabs a dagger from the prop table and tries to hand it to anyone who'll take it.

CONDELL

Enough, Will, please, enough.

WILL

Not near enough.

Staggering, The King appears in the cell door.

KING

I'll have your head cut off!

WILL

O, do it now, yourself, if you've the courage,.
Come, come, queer Monarch, kill me, kill me here.

The King takes the dagger and thrusts, nearly stabbing Will, but the action, in his drunken state, causes him to teeter. Will holds him.

WILL (CONT'D)

For this syphlitic canker in my bowels
Is doing it more tortuously than could
You e'er devise, you pitiabile excuse for a god.

Condell takes the dagger out of the King's hand,
rousing the King. Will starts to speak...

SANDS

Please, Master Will, no more.

WILL

I must! For now I'm free to say that I'm
More god than thee.

The Earl lifts the King out of Will's arms and begins to lead him off.

WILL (CONT'D)

(at the exiting King)
Thy false 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 by braver hands, while I...

The King, on the Earl's arm is gone.

WILL (CONT'D)

More like
A true god, daily do create the hopes,

The dreams, the love, the magic of the heart...
 I people the world's own consciousness with those
 Who'll live on far beyond your fearful hope
 Of immortality.

William exhausted, goes to the body of the Gaoler and starts to drag him off, but Condell, and Sands move to lift the Gaoler and, shaming Bacon into assisting, with Will, carry him off.

CONDELL

(to Will)
 How do we play this scene?

BACON

You won't get past the postern, not to mention all the gates.

WILL

Sir Francis will convince the Tower Lord the gaoler's taken ill?

CONDELL

And that the king insists we get him to the royal physician.

BACON

The king could have you stopped

WILL

Us stopped. And deny our tale?

CONDELL

The king won't want to admit he presided over this.

WILL

The slaughter of the innocent.

SCENE 18 - HALLWAY OUTSIDE THE PRIVY COUNCIL CHAMBER

One of the Earlsman pacing the hall. Sound of debate behind the door to the Council Chamber. The Earls enters and whispers to his man, who 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, Harry.

CARR

(to the Earl)
 Your grace.

The Earl brushes past Bacon moves to Carr.

EARL

Once again, the king is nursing you to health.

KING

(wanting to take Carr away)
Robin?

The Earl moves to block the King from exiting.

EARL

Our investors are impatient, sire. Our investors...

BACON

The council has made its decision.

EARL

Which is?

BACON

Yet to be announced.

EARL

(quietly, urgently)
I need to know what's happening, sire.

The King has noticed that Carr's codpiece is untied and to avoid facing the Earl, ties it.

KING

The bishop has sent the unfortunate Sexton to Canterbury.

EARL

(annoyed at the obfuscation, hopes by keeping him engaged, he'll be told the decision)
Will the Archbishop try him for his crime?

BACON

The Sexton is seeking absolution.

CARR

For his sins.

EARL

Absolution?

CARR

But no trial.

EARL

(to Bacon)
You're the solicitor general, do something.

BACON

The Bishop of London is the appropriate confessor.

EARL

Who is the dead man's 'appropriate confessor?'

KING

God.

BACON

Is this why you've been pacing the hall, your grace?

EARL

What about the man's wife?

BACON

I would have thought you'd already dealt with everything?

EARL

What 'everything?'

CARR

Master Shakespeare, of course.

EARL

And why me?

KING

(growling, at Bacon)
Shakespeare.

BACON

You are an earl.

Bacon shrugs at the King. They've been arguing about Will. The King faces the Earl.

KING

What am I to do, Harry?

EARL

See the king's justice meted out.

KING

No king should have to...

EARL

It was anger, milord, desperation. He was falsely accu...

BACON

It was treason, actually.

EARL

He is ill.

CARR

No King...

EARL

He was provoked by a sanctimonious prig bent on destroying him.

BACON

And made accusations against his most intimate friend, milord Harry Wroithesley.

KING

You still have much to explain.

EARL

Do I?

BACON

Don't you?

KING

I had a dream last night, God warned me I was being seduced.

EARL

The scales of justice being balanced.

KING

Harry, what does that mean?

EARL

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.

BACON

Five percent is not what I would call a kingly share.

EARL

Another two percent, then.

BACON

The council has decided another ten would be kingly.

EARL

Three.

KING

Five.

EARL

In addition to the 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, your grace - military and civil in one.

KING

Sir Francis will arrange a suitable ceremony for the signing.

The King starts out.

EARL

And Shakespeare?

BACON

He writes too freely to know what he believes. He has so blind a faith in man's spirit that he 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. Well, Harry, so be it. (to Bacon) You will 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.

CARR

(showing his copy)

Six.

KING

Did you love him?

EARL

I have loved many people, sire, as have you.

KING

Did you really...?

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 19 - CLERESTORY, ST. SAVIOUR CHURCH

A 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 to arrange forgiveness for what you've done, the king will surely ban this company from court.

WILL

I spoke my heart, Dick, not yours. And

BURBAGE

In the king's eyes, you are us, god save us.

WILL

Remind me to speak to Condell about his tittle-tattling.

BURBAGE

Will! (forcing himself to make a hard 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, these six long years. (a burst of hushed anger) I was locked in gaol, for a fortnight. Not you.

BURBAGE

Without the intercession of Southampton we shall starve.

WILL

(controlled calm)

Afraid to work for your supper at this late date in life? I'm sure he'll come. Be patient. He's an earl.

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. Grave diggers set up prie dieu (kneelers) in the "next room" for the funeral service. Will eats and sips, watching Titania.

WILL

Ill 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 and rough 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.

WILL

Perhaps, but she is not at hand.

The Earl enters with two hooded women, helping each
to a prie dieu. He offers to introduce them but they
decline.

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 the two women, whispering. 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. But the Earl tosses him a sack of silver.

EARL (CONT'D)

Take this and give Will 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 (CONT'D)

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...

WILL
 Beg?

EARL
 I need to be free of the past.

WILL
 None of us can be... can we?

EARL
 Our past.

WILL
 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
 And burned them. 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, by royal decree, 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
Too many...
and none well.
My wife?

WILL (CONT'D)
My age?

EARL
Yes. (taking Will aside) You are commanded to retire to Stratford, by the king.

WILL
Or?

EARL
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 desperate realization) I'll die there, Harry. 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 wants never again to see you, 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 pathetically 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 delicious 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 (CONT'D)

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
That my 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 (CONT'D)

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, and 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 truths 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. And I did it, playing parts. I could let no one alter me. Not mother. Nor Judith.

ANNE

Nor me.

WILL

My father bent to mother till he broke. Gilbert and Richard 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 imposed mold or borrowed thought.

ANNE

And yet he died.

WILL

I had to guard the nature in me, Anne. 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.

Sold.
WILL

Should you stop writing?
ANNE

And die? I write to visit all the new-discovered country in myself.
WILL

Oh, Will, the more you seek your nature's wants the more you lose your natural state.
ANNE

Uncanny wisdom.
WILL

For a woman?
ANNE

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.
WILL

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.
ANNE

(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 20 - 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 grave diggers 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,
That holds 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 the 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 a 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.
 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...
 My youngest brother gave his too short life
 To keep 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 do you 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,

ANNE

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 words 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