

Shakespeare
and the
Dark Lady
of the sonnets •

by Enzo Condello

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Dedicated to Julia, keeper of the flame.

Cast in Order of Appearance.

Anne 1: age 42. Anne 1 is the writer of the play and Shakespeare's wife. When she enters as an actor into her own play she is designated in the text as 'Anne'.

Anne 2: alter-ego/ muse who doubles sometimes as wife, queen, writer, and as a muse who moves the action forward.

Shakespeare: age 34. Poet and playwright. Discontented, restless.

John Trevelyn: age 35. A heartbroken poet, Shakespeare's friend.

Emilia Bassano: age 28. First appears as mysterious woman with whom Shakespeare falls in love at first sight.

Henry Condell: age 35. Actor at the Globe Theatre.

The Lord Hunsdon: cousin to Queen Elizabeth. Emilia is his mistress.

Actors further double in the following parts when the play *Hamlet* is staged:

Shakespeare – Hamlet
Condell – Horatio
Emilia – Ophelia
Anne 2 – Queen Elizabeth

In Shakespeare's dream, Act 2, Scene 7:

Anne 2 – Spirit of Titania
Condell – Spirit of Romeo
Hunsdon – Spirit of Mark Antony

The action takes place in Stratford Upon Avon and London C. mid 1590's.

[Anne1, who is Anne Hathaway the writer, sweeps the stage, creates the circle and lights the main candle and sits. She picks up the pen. Anne2, who is the muse/alter ego, enters and pushes her hand to the paper. Anne1 begins to write the play...]

[Anne1: "Shakespeare and the Dark Lady of the sonnets" A play in two acts by Anne Hathaway. ACT ONE, Scene One. Enter William Shakespeare. He sits working at the family home, in Stratford. The room is bare, with little furniture. My husband reads:]

Shakespeare: 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed.'
But thy, how shall it proceed? But thy eternal?...
'Thy eternal summer. Thy eternal summer shall not disappear, no 'fade'
Yes 'But thy eternal summer shall not fade.'
Yes. Not fade.

[Anne 2, the muse, tends to give stage directions and moves the action forward to the surprise of Anne Hathaway]

[Anne2: Enter Anne Hathaway]

[Anne 2 pushes Anne 1 into centre stage as the actor. Whenever Anne 1 enters the space of her play as an actor she becomes Anne Hathaway. Whenever she leaves the space of her play she becomes Anne 1 the writer again]

Anne: Will.

Shakespeare: Anne...

Anne: Still writing?
So far into night?
Dawn will be upon us
As quickly as a day's passing.

[Anne2: Look at it]

You have fought with your verse.
"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"
Another sonnet? How many brew in you?"
"But thy eternal summer shall not fade."
Shall not fade eh? This one's for me?
Or I cut off more than your tongue.
I need a restful change.

Shakespeare: And so you shall have one.

Anne: What do you say?

Shakespeare: I will take you to London.

Anne: O Will!

Shakespeare: O Will – will, take you to London.
It is long overdue
Like pearly dew
On a lustreless flower.

Anne: Am I getting lustreless?
And perhaps my lustrelessness
Does not incite your lust or less
Of it?

Shakespeare: Not so. You protest wrongly.

[Anne2: Go to bed]

Anne: O I'm worn out.
Lustreless?

[Anne2: O She has paid her dues, And they have not been pearly...]

Shakespeare: We will go to London.

Anne: Heaven help London.

Shakespeare: A fine wife. Beyond compare.
Though one can gasp for breath
Even when there's sufficient air.

[Anne2: What's that you say?]

Shakespeare: O Nothing.

Anne: Come to bed. The sheets are cold. My legs cold.

[Anne2: *(to Shakespeare)* Go to the window]

Shakespeare: And cooler the hold.
Ardour wanes like pale moon
A trick of the lover's eye
To clothe love with a new garb.
Worn out, faded cloth does hang there;
Then it stands too familiarly naked
That it pleads with Venus
To take arms against decline
And fall into her embracing repair.

Anne: I can't hear what you're saying.

[Anne2: What are you saying? There is a knock on the door]

Shakespeare: Who knocks at this late hour?

Anne: So late, to disturb our peace.

[Anne2: Shakespeare opens the door]

Shakespeare: Why it's John Trevelyn. I was expecting you earlier.
John come in.

[Anne2: John enters. He walks in unsteadily]

Anne: Drunk.

John: Forgive the hour Will. The curse of Cupid brings me here.
A poet seeking another for consolation. Here are the poems I promised to bring you.

Shakespeare: Drinking again. Your Mary again?

John: Not mine, Will. How the shrew spurns!

Shakespeare: John, let her go.

John: She has my heart and will not return it.
Wrenched these eyeballs and juggles them with jest.

Anne: You are unwell.

John: Yes, this consumptive love is sickness...sickness!
She's wily. Play one for a fool. I'm sport for her.
But then assumes another aspect.
Asks for my poetry and then sits listening
Like an angel on fiery ice till she gives birth
To a demon.
She calls the tune on her luring flute and I
Her dismal dancer, loving and hating at once In broken melody.

Anne: Then she's not worthy of you.

Shakespeare: You have suffered too long.

John: [*Ignoring them*] But she spurns with such tenderness and as such there's more force in it.

Shakespeare: Such force is in the lover's eyes.

John: Force! Whatever it be or wherever it is,
In my eyes or her face, form or words,
It has bored into my gut, snapped the brain
In two that I have thrown away the saner
Part, grated my nerves to threads, set my
Diminished mind fragile on the edge

[Anne2: Take out the dagger!]

As on this knives' edge; so this love
Has carved me a stranger to myself.

Shakespeare: Put away the knife.

John: Or put away a life,
to end this endless hurt.

Shakespeare: John, love is a wound that heals the wound.

John: She has bled me such that life is draining away.
Will what can I do, help me. I don't
Know where to turn or take heart. Even
In my dreams I weep. Her hoped for
Comfort is more affliction.

Shakespeare: Calm, Calm.

Anne: John, sit down.

[Anne2: Straighten up]

John: No Anne. Let me not trouble you further.
I came tonight to bring my poems to Will
But really to bring my bitter woes to a warm house
For they are homeless.

Shakespeare: This house is always open to you and welcomes them.

John: Dear, dear friend.

Anne: John, seek out a proper marriage to rid you of this pain.

John: I'll marry none but her though she's a tavern wench!

Shakespeare: John, listen to Anne. Mary enjoys your chase. Choose another.

John: Will, you of all men should understand. There is her and no other. You love Anne and are married. I would follow Mary into hell if this love so chooses. She tortures as she teases but I'm certain there's love in her somewhere. I'll tease it out of her. This pain the price I'll pay. She has her eye on another, I'm sure; she looks desiringly on knavish men, but me, - and mirrors their desire.

Shakespeare: John, control yourself. You are crumbling. And drinking much. Mix not Bacchus and Cupid.

John: Yes, this nectar is galling. Will,
Full of swirling miasma is my mind.
I fear I can no longer steer it.
Anne, forgive this intrusion.

Anne: No intrusion John.

John: Goodnight Anne. Will, read my poems.
Tears crystallize into words
My heart the inkwell that my pen dips into.

Anne: Yes, you get home John. Will, accompany him.

John: No Will. Stay with Anne.
The moon outside is love's emblem
And a dark witch's light
Venture not into this witch's night.
O it is dark.
Goodnight Will, goodnight friends, goodbye...

[Anne2: John leaves]

Anne: O poor John.

Shakespeare: A heart at the core of pain. That love should madden such a man, who once was so sensible. This is a mystery. I've written but understand it with ink, not blood; how love could fragment the sturdy. Such love is like madman who instructs an idiot to teach fool. O I write but I understand little like a blind man in a world of colours.

Anne: You did rightly understand Romeo and Juliet.

Shakespeare: That being requited love. But that was by the book.

Anne: But let's to bed, Will. That we have each other.

Shakespeare: We have. But I will leave in the morning for London.

Anne: How long this time?

Shakespeare: Six months, I must perform for Her Majesty
The Hamlet play – it is a first draft.
Time – that Usurper.
And we its bedeviled subjects go from
Our prison to our vaults. The rank futility!

Anne: Why – Will why so downcast? London is to be
Our recreation. Banish this heavy mettle
And release the silver spring
That even now begins to activate nature.
Look – how that seasonal magician like
A mighty Merlin begins to stir plant roots
With his ancient wand.

Shakespeare: Wand?

Anne: A magical wand.

Shakespeare: [*aside*] O would that my wand were magical
And spring to life, rise to the rejuvenating season.

Anne: Life would be magical.

Shakespeare: Yes Anne. And tragical.

Anne: Tragical? Why so disheartened? What's in your thoughts?

Shakespeare: John Trevelyn.

Anne: John, shall in time, marry true love.
As I have loved you all these years.

Shakespeare: ...So many years.

Anne: And love without tears. Dry eyes can see where
Love's tears do blind them.

Shakespeare: Then to London, Will and Wife shall go.
I shall leave at daybreak
And you at a later time.

[Anne2: Take her to bed]

[*He kisses her and leaves*]

Anne: Another morning departure and he's gone.

[Anne2: Time is swift-footed.]

Anne: Mornings trip over each other
And usher in days of discontent;

[Anne2: And swifter still is the passing
Of advancing age that hastens our end.
Time is a babe crawling in childhood]

Anne: But leopard-like leaps towards its ageing prey.
Where have the years gone?

[Anne2: Burdened with worry, toil and checked desire
We are but shadows of possibility.
Illusions are married to the insubstantial
And substance is wasted on brute survival!]

Anne: What am I to make of him
When he draws me to his spirit's bedchamber
And then leaves with his bed pristine.

[Anne1, the writer: Act 1, Scene Two. A room. Shakespeare is alone.]

Shakespeare: Here you are William, here in another room, another inn.
These lone interludes between Stratford and London.
I collect my soul in these passing rooms:
Stratford my hearth and London my home,
Divided between two loves, one bride, one a groom
And married to a craft that divorces me from both.
The years do pass like spent candles.
The night is entering into sleep.
[Woman/Emilia enters]
And the moon caresses her
With his beams, silvering
Her dark face, while stars
Stud her black hair. Lidless,
They sleep not but keep vigil
While night sleeps as the Queen
Of love in her dark heaven.
O invisible beauty! Our own star has left!
Either for pain or heartbreak
Or in dereliction of its duty.
Then to rest. May tomorrow be fair weather.

[Anne1: Act 1 Scene Three. London. Enter Shakespeare who has recently left the astrologer's house. He notices a woman standing nearby. She is looking about, searchingly.]

Shakespeare: O she does teach beauty to speak in tongues!
Who could she be?
That such a portion of heaven should walk this earth!
(approaches her) Forgive this intrusion.

Woman: *(affecting a foreign accent)* Si?

Shakespeare: Does the lady need direction? You seem lost. I know this quarter well.

Woman: No. Lost I am not. But I wish to know the house of the astrologer.

Shakespeare: To have found what I thought was lost!

Woman: Prego?

Shakespeare: Nothing. A thought.

Woman: Si'.

Shakespeare: Forman – the doctor, the astrologer you seek.

Woman: Si, Forman. You know his house?

Shakespeare: At this street's end. I know the doctor, I just visited him. Let me guide you there.

Woman: I need no guiding from any man especially strangers.

Shakespeare: Pardon – are you from London or visiting? You're Italian in speech or origin?

Woman: Both speech and origin

Shakespeare: And live in London?

Woman: Si London. Are you a tax-collector?

Shakespeare: Who I? A taxcollector?

Woman: You question too much. Troppe domande.

Shakespeare: By my word. I'm a collector of dreams.

Woman: Of dreams? What tax, coin, do they raise?

Shakespeare: Why but a revenue that cannot be enforced
Or squandered. Dreams that do tax me with their wealth.

Woman: Well, you must be un poeta!
For only they can dream when the poverty awakens them.

Shakespeare: Why lady, both beauty – and wisdom do you possess!

[Anne1: She starts to leave]

Woman: A little beauty perhaps. But keep away. Off with you

Shakespeare: Then let dreams bestow the wisdom lacking
Please remain a moment. Your eyes hold me here.

Woman: But yours do not. Do you always pester women on the street?
Go to a whorehouse. I seek the astrologer.

Shakespeare: O the stars have already scripted thy beauty.
You need no astrologer to tell you that.

Woman: You are a stranger who talks of strange things. Insolente!
You are coming too close. Go to the whorehouse.

Shakespeare: A whorehouse?
Heaven's script does pin us to this spot.
Near the astrologer's house. Fated to meet.

Woman: Then let me move from this spot and stop pestering.
If I have aroused you go take a bath.

Shakespeare: No stay a moment for we are pinned here
By a star's point.

Woman: The point may wound.

Shakespeare: Or stitch us together.

Woman: Do you enjoy bad treatment?
I must go. Goodbye. To the astrologer.

[Anne1: Again, she begins to leave]

Shakespeare: A moment, please.

Woman: Tu sei un'uomo molto sentimentale
Sei innamorato?

Shakespeare: Fair Italian! Speak whatever tongue
No single language can ever claim you

Woman: Are you a genuine dreamer
Or perhaps a wolfish schemer?
My dreaming poet. Sei pazzo!
You know me not and in a moment
You have declared a lifetime of faith
That takes a lifetime to declare.

Shakespeare: We are less strangers now.
Beauty is swiftly announced
Like an instant memory bestriding a lifetime,
Its flashing fusion white-heats
As love is thought in fusion with the heart.

Woman: Too hot. Devo andare. You have had your moment.

Shakespeare: Your name?

Woman: E il tuo bello?

Shakespeare: William. Will.

Woman: Guglielmo

Shakespeare: And yours?

Woman: Apollonia. Contessa Apollonia Marchese

Shakespeare: O fair Apollo's muse!

Woman: You are a poet – then?

Shakespeare: Of most questionable rank. But a humble scribbler who attempts to scratch the sublime. Do come to the theatre. Look out for my dramas.

Woman: Dramas? William...

Shakespeare: Shakespeare.

Woman: Yes, I have heard of you.

Shakespeare: Then it is fate! In which quarter do you live?

Woman: In London.

Shakespeare: But where?

Woman: In London

Shakespeare: So vast to find you again.

Woman: I'll find you
If the stars so desire.

Shakespeare: O both the stars and I do desire
As we are written in their script
On this astrologer's street.

Woman: Troppo profondo. Acquire more lightness.

Shakespeare: *[flirting more ardently]*
Lightness? When I know that
I might never see you again?
Never again, this face that
The angels have laboured long
To fashion. That they, awed
By their handiwork become drowsy
With viewing it? O lady have pity!
App-o-llonia without that bite of thy
Sweet red apple,
-Shall I not grow lonelier

Woman: Good. Bene. *[they kiss]*

[Anne1: They unlock!]

Woman: You are touching lighter
Scostumato!

Shakespeare: Scos – tomato.

Woman: Scostumato. It means rude.

Shakespeare: Then let me be not the apple, but the tomato of your eye.

Woman: You are mad! Pazzo! Desire it seems makes men so.

Shakespeare: As mad as a sunflower drinking
The nectar – light of the sun

Woman: Are you married?

Shakespeare: Wedded to your spirit – these eyes, brow.
This slender hand, this Venus
Form whose living arms have I found.

Woman: O enough! This is getting too familiar
I thank you actor- poet for your drama and entertainment.
Farewell. And don't forget the whorehouse.

[Anne1: She leaves!]

Shakespeare: Entertainment? Whorehouse! She jests at scars that
Never felt a wound. John Trevelyn
I understand you better now.
Surely I will find her again if she truly
Walks in London? But not, I pray in a whorehouse.

[Anne1: Act 1, Scene Four. The stage at Shakespeare's theatre in London.]

Shakespeare: The muse deigns to reveal herself?
To spur my inspiration? Mock my marriage?
Play a game of divine love?
Would that I could see her and
Not see her again. For having seen
Her once is enough to imprint her face
On this troubled heart. Utterly hers.
Utterly in line of my vision – her eyes.
Would that I'll not see her again, perhaps
So that yearning may not tyrannize.

[Anne1: Enter Henry Condell...]

Henry: Will –

[Anne1: ...in the style of commedia del arte!]

O Will welcome back
Three months of absence and this
Company has been a pit of snaky politics without you.

Shakespeare: Henry...*[embraces him]*

Henry: Eden were a safer place
With the arch-serpent slithering about
Than theatre politics in London.

Shakespeare: So quick the discord

Henry: As Hamlet's rapier. The back-stabbing is back.

Shakespeare: No need to marvel at that. The globe bearing Atlas
Turns in bewilderment at the lunge.

Henry: Burbage refuses to do Hamlet.

Shakespeare: Refuses?

Henry: He is convinced of plotters.

Shakespeare: Plotters? This is imagination's torment

Who or where are these plotters?

Henry: In this company, says Burbage
They rail against him.

Shakespeare: He's to be railed against.

Henry: They would pull him down
He says; as envy sees itself
In another's vanity mirror and Burbage
Has surplus vanity to distribute.

Shakespeare: Hamlet will have his day
It will go on. Must do so.
The play's the thing by which
We'll catch the patronage of the Queen.
She requests a performance.

Henry: I see. Perhaps Richard knows not
That the Queen will attend?

Shakespeare: He knows and having performed
Often enough before royalty
Considers himself unofficially majestic.

Henry: Currently thornily crowned.

Shakespeare: More's the persecution's bombast.
His pricked head will not deflate. But I do love the man.

Henry: A pox on our problems. How does Anne and the children?

Shakespeare: Well. She is to come to London.

Henry: Anne come to London?

Shakespeare: Since London will not go to Ann.

Henry: Then I shall finally meet her.
The paragon of patience must she be.
Your long absences must rue her.

Shakespeare: The unholy pound dwarves the time
As it makes minutes monsters.

Henry: O Will, you give money
Too much weight; pound for pound
I ponder poesy in women's hearts.

Shakespeare: But for who wields the hammer and who becomes the anvil.

Henry: Then these matters are for blacksmiths.

Shakespeare: The heart is heavy business – with love or money – both do pound it.
Henry let me speak a small
Piece of my heart that has little peace.

Henry: May I presume to guess – love?

Shakespeare: That sometimes tardy comes, but comes.

Henry: Foxy the chase.
Who, may one ask, is so fair?

Shakespeare: O Henry, friend that I do love,
I have been thunderbolted by one
So suddenly that in the illumination
The world is viewed as a newborn.

Henry: Love can nourish the world
As suckling does a babe.

Shakespeare: This, I fear, is second youth. Or first love.

Henry: Or infancy. Tell how this happened.

Shakespeare: Yesterday. On Highgate Road. Close to Forman – the astrologer

Henry: Near the doctor-astrologer, you met her?

Shakespeare: She being on her way to Forman
And her witching gaze compelled
Me to address her. Of Italianate origin
She be, as though Petrarch's sonnets formed,
Had walked into life, the word's stirring
And smouldering into flesh. So glowing
With tempered fire to melt false images.

Henry: Passing by, you say?
There is a lady, so I've heard
Of some Italian blood, attached to her majesty's court but she's Been
connected long to the Queen's cousin, Henry Carey
The Lord Hunsdon. This I've heard whispered about.

Shakespeare: Could not be the same.

Henry: Of some Italian blood – they say.
Dark haired and wanton, they say.

Shakespeare: She is dark but not wanton, her tresses
Are night flowing, her eyes two stars.
A Goddess, her comely form walks with the elementals;
Her step grows flowers and makes them drowsy to follow her.

[Anne1: To thine own selves, be true.]

Henry: O! This is fantasy! Dangerous love!

Shakespeare: Love risks the infernal, though heavenly conceived.
Henry, seek, look out for her and tell no knave.

Henry: Tread carefully Will. Love walks as fire
On thin ice when it finds
The snow so pure.

Shakespeare: Tell none. But watch out for her. I must counsel the actors.
We have our Hamlet to awaken.

[Henry leaves]

[Anne1: Act 1, Scene 5. Shakespeare, look at them. They are your actors]

Shakespeare: 'Speak the speech trippingly on the tongue,
Overstep not the modesty of nature!
Hamlet's words to the actors and now
My own to you as we prepare to
Stage this first draft of Hamlet for the Queen.
Art is it that redeems the abysmal pits
Though we be plagued by Nature.
If all were loose, ungirdled, all
Would fall apart; without skeleton,
Though there is death in it, the body
Of existence would collapse, as would character.
Formlessness is dissolution. Only the
Nature of love is a mystery we might
Not bridle. All but love is limited.
And that has modesty infinite.
Therefore to Hamlet comes to our little stage.
Elsinore, the rock he stands upon
Receiving the buffets of inexplicable Fate,
This philosopher with no philosophy.
'To thine own selves be true'

[Anne1: Enter Henry]

Henry...

Henry: I have this week enquired about.

Shakespeare: And?

Henry: There is an Italian lady. And part English
Slander pursues her.

Shakespeare: The same woman? Surely not so.

Henry: I have spoken with her.

Shakespeare: Spoken with her? But where?

Henry: At the Salon. Lord Hunsdon's wench is she.

Shakespeare: The same?

Henry: Yes. She the same that you spoke to near the astrologer.
She admitted as much. She wishes to see you.
Knows who you are.

Shakespeare: Apollonia?

Henry: Changes names as women do aspects
Emilia Bassano her true name.
You are correct. Her beauty is Cleopatra's.
And the Antony had I to curb in myself.
She's musical as would play the heartstrings
The virginals she plays and she no such thing
Lays herself 'neath more than one instrument,
So the piping rumour goes.

Shakespeare: A wench? Musical? Emilia Bassano her name?

Henry: A snatch of the siren to lyrically waxed Ulysses
And pens poetry as well. Pens poetry!

Shakespeare: A poet? She a poet? What has she written, I wonder.

Henry: Her verses are gaining court favor.
She recited some lines that struck of talent.
O she has more than one talent and now
Wishes to prove others. She desires your instruction.
And desires to meet with you. Today she comes.

Shakespeare: She comes? Today? Why, Henry, you are love's midwife.

Henry: Giving entrance to I know not what. She seeks your assistance.

Shakespeare: The Lord Hunsdon's mistress you say?

Henry: Yes. Revealed by a trusted source.

Shakespeare: Then I shall assist her. Instruct her. Perhaps His Lordships
Patronage we'll secure. And perhaps her love, Henry.

Henry: Will, true love cannot be traded like base metal

Shakespeare: Though rudely procured my own
Shall turn the adulterated into pure gold.

Henry: O Will! Do not take the hook.

Shakespeare: I'm baited already. She shall resuscitate me

Henry: And Anne? Your wife? What about your wife?

Shakespeare: Anne?

Henry: She arrives in a short time.
What if she should discover this secret?

Shakespeare: She need know nothing. Henry?

Henry: My tongue is yours for safekeeping.

[Anne1: There is a knock on the door]

It would be her.

[Anne1: Henry opens the door. Enter Emilia Bassano]

Shakespeare: Apollonia!

Emilia: Apollonia? Why Emilia is my name.
Mr William Shakespeare, we have met elsewhere.

Shakespeare: If it please you, call me Will.

Emilia: Mr Shakespeare for now.

Shakespeare:: To be in the company of so worthy a lady.

Emilia: I fear unworthy, Mr Shakespeare to one whose Poetry showers London's parched souls.

Henry: Why, the fair lady is a poet herself and most sensible. But I must take my leave.

[Anne1: Henry leaves...]

Good day your ladyship.

[Anne1: ...with chair!]

Emilia: Emilia – please.

Shakespeare: Why did you not reveal Yourself at the astrologer, Emilia? Why the Countess Apollonia?

Emilia: O lies and jest do mix.

Shakespeare: You jest at scars?

Emilia: You dramatise small wounds. "Jest at scars", That's from your Romeo and Juliet?

Shakespeare: The same, dear Emilia...

Emilia: Dear? You are becoming a little too familiar.

Shakespeare: I give you my heart
My breast has a vacancy only you can fill
You have consumed my mind since we met
On that astrologer's street
I'll declare it like Romeo, as sincerity compels me to do no other.

Emilia: O Mr Shakespeare how could this come to be?

Shakespeare: 'Was there anyone who did not love but at first sight? As my luckless Friend Marlowe said and well knew, and which I did not Till now. First sighted and baited and I fear, Slighted.

Emilia: O you must temper such idealizations. A little craft in your communication

Shakespeare: O I did and do have cunning to match A devil. Emilia let me flower in paradise

[Anne1: Tempt me with your apple.]

Tempt me with your apple. With such Taste would Eden come again.

Emilia: But the bite led to the fall.

Shakespeare: That it did. Not through knowledge of love But its unlearning.

Emilia: Then the serpent is still with us?

Shakespeare: Its bite not mine excommunicates me
From the jewelled garden where golden
Hearts sprout on trees like apples;
Hearts of gold that cannot be bitten into.

Emilia: If I be your Eve,
Can I tempt you to leave?

[Anne1: Yes, leave this Garden of Eden]

Shakespeare: What leave, so soon?

Emilia: Mr Shakespeare the same love first sight
Is a look I sincerely cannot requite
I must speak straight.

Shakespeare: Then speak crooked!
That I having entered this maze
May find my way out. But in vain. Though
In this labyrinth of light, I fear,
There is only the dark in the exit

Emilia: O Stop it!

Shakespeare: ...I speak true.

Emilia: A friend you shall be now. No more, Mr Shakespeare
Stop these unsettling declarations.

Shakespeare: I declare love and you mock it?

Emilia: Tis a woman's right

Shakespeare: Love's other edge, it seems.

Emilia: O Forget philosophy. Seize opportunity!
Now down to the business at hand.
Be it known that I am close to the Lord
Hunsdon, who as you could know, is
Cousin to the Queen. I wish to learn the
Poetic craft and if you could tutor be
Then my well placed, well endowed
Lordship could shower favours on your stagecraft.

Shakespeare: But do you feel any stirring of love?

Emilia: None but to make a friend of you.

Shakespeare: Friendship can be a start.
Something deeper may follow.

Emilia: I think not. O Will there are other beauties.

Shakespeare: Not so. I have seen general traffic.
Yours the transporting chariot to their carts.

Emilia: I am just another woman.
Though fair as are a hundred others,

Emilia: I must go.

Shakespeare: Stay.

Emilia: I must go. My Lord Hunsdon waits. He wishes to see
The Queen

Shakespeare: Then you will come again soon?

Emilia: Only if you teach me the poetic craft.

Shakespeare: If you would teach me loves.

Emilia: You have already written it.

Shakespeare: Written but not lived it.

Emilia: The heart has no head. Goodbye. You will teach me?

Shakespeare: I shall.

Emilia: Then Mr Shakespeare...Will...shall be rewarded.
Farewell.

[Anne1: She leaves]

Shakespeare: But not requited. Then love without hope.
And in the rejection become a celibate Pope.
Where unearthly beauty can the soul inspire
When the flesh cannot be licked by fleshly fire.
My only known love returns indifference
If it were explosive hate a chance to spark
Might ignite love to a flame
Against spent apathy no candle can burn
Nor to torch turn.

[Anne1: Shakespeare, stay. Act 1, Scene 6. A room. Enter The Lord Hunsdon and Emilia.]

Hunsdon: And where has the wench been?

Emilia: In search of a little piece of eternity.

Hunsdon: A vain pursuit

Emilia: A Poet's pursuit.

Hunsdon: We're temporality's toys. But get to. Get to. The dear couz waits. I'll
flaunt you to the court, my wench, without seeming to know you. Arouse
me with mystery my mistress. My familiar wife will benefit
consequentially.

Emilia: Which mystery would you desire today?
Of eye? Aspect? Or word?

Hunsdon: All three should be heard
In mixed and equal measure
In a triumvrate of pleasure.

Emilia: The trick is in the seeming.

Hunsdon: But get to. Get to. Before I ravish you here.

Emilia: Cool off. Unhand me! I met a man today.

Hunsdon: But one?

Emilia: An unusual spirit. The poet Shakespeare.

Hunsdon: O the lowly playwright. I've heard much of him.
His quill, of another sort, does thrill.

Emilia: Adored his 'Romeo and Juliet'.

Hunsdon: I have yet to see his dramas.

Emilia: O there a quite a few. I think he may
Have a touch of the genius.

Hunsdon: Not to be compared to Marlowe or Jonson I surmise.
There are others worthier. Elizabeth enjoys him.

Emilia: But Shakespeare deserves more attention.

Hunsdon: Henry, Earl of Southhampton, is a patron
The beautiful boy has locked into him. Showed
Me one of Shakespeare's sonnets. I say it
Had merit.

Emilia: You think the Earl beautiful?

Hunsdon: Gorgeous I must say. I'm dizzy in his presence.
Those divine locks. That powdered youthful skin
That matches the fairest of ladies. A dove of a boy...
He is of equivocal gender.

Emilia: My lord is impressed.

Hunsdon: But you, dear girl, are best. Here, a necklace I have for you.

Emilia: O my lord [*She tries it on*]
By a timely display of pearl
You dissolve suspicion of the Earl.
It's beauty delights.

Hunsdon: My wench is the beauty.

Emilia: Of hand, of foot or thigh.

Hunsdon: Emilia...

Emilia: Your own pearls will drip with my nectar.

Hunsdon: Saucy girl.

Emilia: Indeed, drippingly...

Hunsdon: We must leave soon.

Emilia: Must we? Look into William Shakespeare.

Hunsdon: What are we to do with Shakespeare at this moment?

Emilia: Favour him. His theatre. His plays excite me.
More favours for you. I get the desire watching them.

Hunsdon: If you put it so. But we must go

Emilia: Must we? Five minutes of this bitch
To scratch and massage your pearly itch.

Hunsdon: You are passion's witch.

Emilia: Five minutes to reward
My generous and inflamed lord.

Shakespeare: Blackout!

[Anne1: Act 1, Scene 7. A room at Shakespeare's theatre. Emilia and Shakespeare are alone...for now.]

Shakespeare: Emilia, I worship you.

Emilia: And I your poetry.

Shakespeare: I shall enshrine you in it.

Emilia: Teach me the craft as you have these last weeks and I shall shine in you.
More potent than your poetry, it seems, am I.

Shakespeare: My words are feeble beside this form of yours, these eyes that hold me
more than your arms could.

Emilia: You would that my arms could hold you more than my eyes?

Shakespeare: That embrace would not hold the all of you.

Emilia: O Will, again, how could you have fallen thus?

Shakespeare: From where does the tempest gather?
I know not how love so comes or directs it's imperious command.

Emilia: Come now but how does my poetry's progress? Will I too pen lines as
fine as your own. What think you? Come Will. Come love's poet.

Shakespeare: I cannot direct the muse. My own is capricious. If it come it will come.

Emilia: As love. My own, too, capricious.

Shakespeare: Which strikes me with the heart of poetry.

Emilia: Strikes you below Will, not your heart. I am not worthy of your heart.
You men see with your appendage where your heart does reside and
falsity lies on your tongue that you spit on innocent eyes as mine once
were.

Shakespeare: I cannot lie when I speak with heart truth.

Emilia: O there was more than one man that has savaged me with true heart after the satisfaction. I had a child by the Lord Hunsdon and to cover disgrace, a marriage arranged with Lanier who cares not but for his pocket. My marriage, a mockery.

Shakespeare: For such circumstances, more pity do I feel that further my love heats.

Emilia: It be heated enough; that which is false and lies between legs. Look I show you a breast, a breast you see and not my heart.

Shakespeare: You toy with emotions that are in thrall of you.

Emilia: The seducer, in heat, will say and suffer all. You desire the way of the senses, their pleasure and torment you wish to know. Be familiar with my body and you shall know not me but the fire of your purgatory. You cannot brand me with your glowing stick.

Shakespeare: If I love you with spirit, the body would follow.

Emilia: I should put out your fire with my liquids.

Shakespeare: Your charms, liquids, nectar: sweet or galling. If love be blind in emotions then it sees with senses.

Emilia: Love potions in a steaming cauldron fired by desire without familiarity's ashes. How your glowing stick rekindles!..How your torch does burn bright!

Shakespeare: You are a bright angel riding the witch's black- strawed stick.

Emilia: Then let me ride you as you ride with me, with your own bright stick.

Shakespeare: Until journey's end. Ride high, till skies be reached. If love lies in the senses, let me find it though I risk my own.

[They begin making love]

[Anne1: BLACKOUT! Act1, Scene 8. Shakespeare is alone again.]

Shakespeare: O how imperious the flesh and its stings!
 What I thought was above the loins
 Is now below – heart and loins meet in an unfamiliar
 Demon's pact. O it be the flesh that rises and falls in love!

[Anne1: Enter Henry]

Henry...

Henry: Will?

Shakespeare: This is a Will with a diminished will. She is pilfering my familiar self.

Henry: By what means?

Shakespeare: I am overcome Henry. The temptation as strong as Adam's. Her Venus arms, alabaster breasts – I have slipped into her dark pit.

Henry: All this time, these months tutoring her the poetic craft and this the end result. What fruits are borne? Poetry indeed!

Shakespeare: The fruit has brought it's own temptation. I thought her high as Petrarch's Laura but only see my own infirmities! My own Pegasus a rutting horse. I knew not the power of this flesh. That the heart too, is made of flesh.

Henry: You regarded this love above the loins.

Shakespeare: I deceived myself thinking it so as deception makes the dark bright, but between limbs, between adulterous sheets she has taught the rude unsought lesson.

Henry: Will you must end this.

Shakespeare: End now? I am so far gone in this maze of love that I do not know the way back.

Henry: But Anne. What of Anne? When she arrives, think of what Would happen if she discovers this affair.

Shakespeare: Henry, do not cut conscience further. Anne is betrayed. Her presence is more acute in the absence.

Henry: She arrives in due course. If she uncovers this!

Shakespeare: Too weak a Will that she should know.

Henry: This is troubling.

Shakespeare: Anne would not know . Emilia has withdrawn.

Henry: Withdrawn?

Shakespeare: She refuses me now. She has broken off.

Henry: So brief?

Shakespeare: Yes, as a woman's love.

Henry: Not Anne's.

Shakespeare: No. Not Anne's, Not Anne's!

Henry: Then it is finished with Emilia?

Shakespeare: Finished but not ended, as hunger restarts again after feeding.

Henry: O this is trouble Will, that Anne would uncover.

Shakespeare: How so?

Henry: You have the love forlorn face to show
 There are secrets in your distracted eyes.
 A weathered change has this obsession wrought:
 Sunny one moment, then grey countenance next,
 Cloudy judgement, and then standing like melancholy
 In the rain.

Shakespeare: I am caught in this miasma of love, Henry

Henry: In sticky loin-love. But is this truly love?

Shakespeare: Is there any other? I knew not that love at first sight was desire for that dark site.

Henry: You are jailed and the jailer.

Shakespeare: She the jailer with her dark charms.
She has bewitched me. Her power's supernatural.
If she summons spirits, by which some are
Known to do, then her magic is formidable
And your fond Will turns to jelly. Henry I seek escape but like the
accustomed prisoner am equivocal and so further my captivity.
Pangs of flesh! Pangs of spirit! Now she denies me both flesh and spirit!

Henry: Will, sometimes love's the Via Dolorosa

Shakespeare: To Golgotha or resurrection?

Henry: Can there be one without the other?

Shakespeare: The pain of love that thorns our narrow way.
I'm expecting her soon.

Henry: This stage will consume its course.

Shakespeare: This is a course I had not counted upon or sought.
Henry, if I could be like you and not passion's slave.
If You would have me fall then why
This particular woman who has blown my reason
With so much as her breath? Her kisses.
What manner of new woman of undiscovered country
Is she? Whose like I have never before met!
That stands proud outside the traditional line
And yet enthralled by that waywardness that waylays
Yet threaten by her novelty. I thought to meet a
Simple Juliet! This new wine that intoxicates!

[Anne1: There is a door knock]

That would be her.

Henry: Another poetry lesson?

Shakespeare: Yes, another lesson and she teaches me bitter love's.

[Anne1: Shakespeare opens the door]

Emilia...

Emilia: Will,...Henry how are you?

Henry: Well. And you?

Emilia: Being connected to Will's craft – well.

Henry: You have a fine craftsman.

Emilia: That I have tasted so recently.
That our gender is not permitted
To act on stage as puritanical London allows it not, offends me not.
But the poetic craft is allowed.

And I wish to write poetry half as good as Will's

Henry: Yes, but you may act before friends.

Emilia: I always do so, dear Henry.

[Anne1: He warms to her]

Henry: We are all actors to a degree
And we need no stage to enact our part
Nature can sometimes upstage art.

Emilia: Wise man thinking so.

Shakespeare: Henry if you will leave us now.
We must needs begin our poetry lesson.

Henry: Why poetry, yes, yes indeed. Farewell Emilia.
O Will James is ill
An inexplicable malady, he may not do Ophelia's part.

[Anne1: Henry begins to leave...]

O what a transformation is wrought here!
The mad obsession that is blind to true love!
Thus putting at risk the constant light
That truly stays loyal through the darkest night.

[Anne1: Henry leaves]

Emilia: You are to perform before the Queen?

Shakespeare: Indeed. Her majesty is a whole audience.
Her critical eye critical to our art.
This is a straining business. James ill. I know
Not if Edward will rise to the role of Ophelia

Emilia: Ophelia is a woman.
How can a man play a woman's part?
This is art against the grain of nature.

Shakespeare: Quite so.

Emilia: Indeed. But who should know?

Shakespeare: The difference? A hairless face. A bosom. A voice.

Emilia: These are but trifles. I could do the Ophelia part!

Shakespeare: You? O my fond love, you are a marvel!

Emilia: I'm deathly serious.

Shakespeare: As Ophelia. Women are not permitted on stage.

Emilia: Then I give myself permission. I am my own
Law's legislator. One can disguise the transgressor.
I can act out my own sex and cross over
To the usurping one

Shakespeare: Cross over sex?
Emilia: Indeed
Shakespeare: A cross to bear. Giving birth
To mischievous things, strange shapes
When man is allowed a woman's art
And woman not permitted to return the part.
The decree of the state is wrong I know
And unnatural when nature will not allow it so
But this is the regulation.

Emilia: Then Nature will override the law
As a tempest or flood renders our feeble constructs frail.
Will let me play Ophelia. I will great justice
do her my fond prince Hamlet.
You saw my performance as the Contessa Apollonia.

Shakespeare: Emilia do not ask this favour of me.

Emilia: Favour? I force you not. It is a request.

Shakespeare: Why do you disrupt me?

Emilia: You will be gratified with my performance.
I have seen your Ophelia. She is in my heart.

Shakespeare: She is trembling vulnerable

[Anne1: As I am at the core.]

Shakespeare: Emilia, you have made me love's fool; You betray me with a kiss.

Emilia: Betray you? How so?

Shakespeare: Would that you could know. Thy Lord Hunsdon, will he attend the
Queen's performance?

Emilia: At the Queen's right hand I've insisted that he
Should see your art and told him of Hamlet.
I am doing my part to secure patronage, as promised.

Shakespeare: He may recognise you.

Emilia: My disguises are many.
He will see my subtle art
But not the working of my heart.
My face he will not recognise
He will look at invention with jaded eyes.

[Anne1: Your Will submits.]

Shakespeare: Your Will submits. Then learn your lines.

Emilia: Then I will play the part?

Shakespeare: That the part would make you whole.

Emilia: Meaning?

Shakespeare: You have the part. We must begin to practice.

Emilia: We have touched betimes
On Ophelia. I know the many lines.

Shakespeare: You may have touched her but not grasped her.
And it seems I needs play Hamlet
Will you not remain with me, this night?

Emilia: My husband waits.

Shakespeare: Your husband misses you not.

Emilia: Quite so. You have bitten this apple betimes. How many more would you have?

Shakespeare: To the core of you.

Emilia: And then there be no more. The seeds, too?

Shakespeare: Only to flower your love. Emilia, break not from me now, I beg of you.

Emilia: Then there's beggary in love, my poet?

Shakespeare: And bitter love of beggary to serve you, my master-mistress.

[Anne1: ACT TWO, Scene One.

The stage is dark. Shakespeare appears in a pool of dim light.]

Shakespeare: O what chamber have I stepped into? These months weakly passed in gilded sin! Broken will where I prize my sin!
To her bed! Where I, like a currying cur, wait upon her for renewed feeding for a satiety that cannot satisfy.
And I grovel for morsels, for scraps, lie awake long nights in solitary sweat, while vile scenes perform my sinful act! Her with her lusty lord! My peace gone! These images, she and her lord and which others, the stuff of a horrid dream even while awake in darkness! Mornings I fall in exhausted sleep, neglect myself, my craft while at noon the bell tolls midnight! This hellish heaven and this dark angel who lures! Her scant visits to cool our itching loins! No love from her or else feigned and mine in confusion tossed, frantic-mad, restless with brutal desire as she punishes with long absences.
Emilia! Where are you now? In Hunsdon's arms? In another's bed? She has made a dwarf of me and love and I have made of myself a colossus of a fool. Love where lead you? To what unknown end? I care not: wholeness, respect, self honour, right probity, all fallen before this siren's call!

[Anne1: Enter Emilia]

Where have you been? You have missed practice this passing week.

Emilia: O let Ophelia wait and delay her fate.

Shakespeare: Proud woman! To enact her meek manner you must humbly practice!

Emilia: At my leisure. I'll be mistress to your art and master to her part.

Shakespeare: You toy with the tragic. I'll not endure such!

Emilia: You shall endure!

Shakespeare: I gave you the role and my heart and this how you return my favour – with mocking jest? What fool have I become?

Emilia: O cool your tongue!

Shakespeare: Where have you been? You stay away. Send no message. While in my bed I thrash alone, in a room dim with dark visions of you.

Emilia: I cannot be with you continually. I have my husband and my second husband.

Shakespeare: You say your marriage be a mockery. And your Lord Hunsdon is too aged to quench your fires.

Emilia: O he does rise when required. Your own marriage be now mocked not mine. I was forced in matrimony so it is not holy.

Shakespeare: Then there be others! If you have not the marriage bed to cool desire, Hunsdon cannot encompass it all and this signals you ride with others!

Emilia: Yes, with yourself.

Shakespeare: There is scarcity there.

Emilia: Quit instructing where I should place my parts. You are not the director. My person is not your property!

Shakespeare: Then there be others? I have heard the rumours.

Emilia: Rumours? Believe none of them!

Shakespeare: I love you Emilia; understand that I love you.

Emilia: Take hold. You have your play to soon perform. Collect yourself! End the pleading!

Shakespeare: O you enjoy the power I'm certain.

Emilia: And you your submission! Your tongue licks the whip

Shakespeare: I would escape; but am drawn to you as sickness to plague. I have an ally in the truth, that my eyes do see but to which my dotting heart gives the lie. I would escape!

Emilia: The blind do not suffer what they cannot see.

Shakespeare: But to feel is to suffer! And blood will arouse.

Emilia: My seeing poet, know that your aroused one-eyed stick stokes not my desire, but my pity.

Shakespeare: If I pity your plight the more should I pitied be.

Emilia: Come let us practice now. Come! Make haste!

Shakespeare: Henceforth my art be the brand burning on my brow!

[Anne1: Emilia leaves. Enter Anne, Centre Stage]

Anne: Is this a play? Or a bad dream?
O bad play with twisted plot!
When fugitive love is discovered and true one forgot!
Who was she? To her my ageing face could not
Compare [looks into a mirror]. Her bloom,
Confidence, youthful traits that traitors make
Of men! He is absent most of the year
Can I expect that he not meet others?

[Anne2: That was always a distant fear, like death]

That intimately arrives to shock too early
Or warn too late!

[Anne2: Anne takes out a handkerchief, wipes her hands compulsively, looks at her palms.]

Anne: Do no mischief. Strangle Your own dark promptings. Wash away
Tears, not spilt blood from these trembling fingers.

[Anne2: Anne...]

Anne: Restrain!

[Anne2: ...the wronged woman within]

Anne: Find the cause and make an art of understanding.

[Anne2: Enter Henry]

Henry: She practices well the Lady Ophelia.

Shakespeare: She is to her nature bent. Illusion does make her so, as her living
strength does command weaknesses.

Henry: And your weakness that she bestows?

Shakespeare: A weakness that grows in strength, Henry.

Henry: Will take heart.

[Anne2: Leave Henry]

I must to the store. I'll return anon.

Shakespeare: This bare stage where struts the soul
Teeming with parts darkened by sin and illumined by pain!

[Anne2: Enter Anne]

Anne!

Anne: Will!

Shakespeare: O dear Anne! You were expected later.

Anne: O surprise. I come as a thief in the night. Are you not pleased that I arrive sooner?

Shakespeare: O but indeed, my good wife. The more time to cherish you. Was the journey harsh?

Anne: Not so much as life's. O Will, to be in London! And the performance before the Queen?

Shakespeare: My Hamlet is nearing life. Your suggestions in Stratford regarding Ophelia and Gertrude did help much.

Anne: My good husband, I'll lend insight where I can. O Will I have missed you.

Shakespeare: As I miss you but London is our wages. How are the dear children?

Anne: Suzanna and Judith are well.

Shakespeare: And our son?

Anne: A little pale, but sickly he's always been.

Shakespeare: I look to teaching him the stagecraft, if he chooses.

Anne: So, this is the stage?

Shakespeare: Yes, where strange life unfolds.

Anne: And where women are forbidden to act.

Shakespeare: Yes, women are forbidden.

Anne: As their fruits are not, it seems.

Shakespeare: Anne?

[Anne2: Re-enter Henry]

Henry: Will, before I leave...

Shakespeare: Henry, come and meet Anne, my wife.

Henry: Your wife? Already here? O but this is a rare...pleasure.

Anne: As indeed pleasure is. Why Henry, Will has spoken of you.

Henry: And he much of you.

Shakespeare: And I much of you.

Anne: O has he?

Henry: Folios of the choicest poetry.

Anne: Then poetry is the father of flattery.

Henry: So much have I longed to meet Will's Anne.

Anne: O Will does paint pictures on the mind

I pray his words were delicate brush strokes?

Henry: Most delicate and rare-hued.

Shakespeare: Of tincture most abiding.

[Anne2: Portraits do crack and flake.]

Shakespeare: Your own, my words will re-touch.

Anne: With permanency of oil or faint water-colour?

Shakespeare: Words cannot in water flounder with such a lady of the lake.

Anne: O Will, I pray this painting be not a fake?

Shakespeare: Why no. Most true and original.

Henry: It's value augments with time

[Anne2: As I fear, does it's price.]

Shakespeare: What means my wife?

Anne: O nothing. Nothing.

[Anne2: Leave]

Anne: I am sore after the journey and long for rest. Where may I wash?

Shakespeare: *[pointing]* Just beyond the wing.

[Anne2: Anne leave]

Henry: She has arrived early.

Shakespeare: Or too late.

Henry: What now? How will your art disguise passion now?

Shakespeare: It is already painted black with her hair, her eyes and my conscience as dark as her enveloping night.

Henry: If Anne uncovers it, your dark night will be thunder.

[Anne1: Henry, get off.]

Henry: I'll meet with you later.

Shakespeare: Indeed, love appropriated to another will
Leave the dispossessed wailing in the rain.
It will not reason with any lover's blunder.
It will not hear sense from the source of it's pain.

[Anne2: What, Henry gone?]

[Anne1: Re-enter Anne]

Anne: We are alone again.

Shakespeare: Yes. As ever we be, on this empty stage.

Anne: Will...I have ill news to tell...

Shakespeare: Ill news? O speak Anne...the children?

Anne: No... your poet friend.

Shakespeare: Yes. And what of John?

Anne: He... has passed away Will.

Shakespeare: John Trevelyn...dead. How so?

Anne: By his own hand, Will, by his own hand.

Shakespeare: ...can this be, John dead.

Anne: Forgive that I bring this news.

Shakespeare: The cause?

Anne: His Mary married another. Then further he fell into the dark.

Shakespeare: Into love's malady? O spurning curse.

Anne: O I do not think it was the spurning. I think his mind by nature already bent to harsh crumbling.

Shakespeare: O Anne. Can this be? This is shock that flesh brings! Dear God wherebe your mercy?
...O harsh Fate...damned destiny,
what misery you heap upon us!

[Anne2: Act 2, Scene 2. The staging of Hamlet before the Queen. Enter Horatio. Bring on Ophelia. {Anne2 escorts them in} We need a Queen. {Anne2 offers} Enter Lord Hunsdon. Hamlet is played by William Shakespeare. Let the play begin!]

Hamlet: To be, or not to be, that is the question-
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time.
Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of unrequited love...etc
[Anne1 cuts him off]

[Anne1: Act 2 Scene 3. After the play]

Shakespeare: Your majesty, would that the performance was pleasing to you?

Queen: Mr Shakespeare, I was moved – and deeply so.

Shakespeare: Your majesty.

Queen: Poet, your Hamlet is a strange prince

Shakespeare: Most strange.

Queen: It seems you are now moving towards tragedy. You are holding the mirror up to the darker view. This is a disturbing play. I have not seen the like before.

Shakespeare: Your majesty.

Queen: My cousin, what say you?

Hunsdon: Quite so. You have spoken, my Queen.

Queen: Spoken feebly to so rare a poet.

Shakespeare: You honour me too much. A poet perhaps but not so rare.

Queen: O, I dare say so. I think you will survive the century Mr Shakespeare. Such rare perception is not so easily forgotten, nor fade so quickly.

[Anne1: Bring me the young man Ophelia.]

I thought him a wonder.

Shakespeare: Why – why – he’s undressing now.

Queen: O Poet go fetch him. Go fetch Ophelia.

Shakespeare: Henry... [Condell goes backstage]

Queen: I thought the tragic Ophelia summed up the fate of women.

Hunsdon: O indeed of womankind.

Shakespeare: Kind women or women of their kind?

Queen: O poet don’t blither on!

[Anne1: re-enter Henry with Ophelia – Emilia]

O here is Ophelia. You finely acted Ophelia’s tragedy.

Emilia: *[trying not to be recognised]* Thankyou your majesty.

Queen: It was a grave defect of her nature, to have fallen thus.

Emilia: A bane to have loved the prince Hamlet so.

Hunsdon: Quite So. Look! The boy seems quite shy.

Shakespeare: O he is, actors who can play the tempest of passion often in their own lives are but a breeze. Or are unmoved air spirits. Cool as fog. Their esoteric fire is hermetic.

Queen: He’s a timid boy. I’ll not bestir him. Well, I must retire. I must rise early for the kingdom. The cockcrows duty. What was that line, Mr Shakespeare, that Hamlet spoke, something of office...?

Shakespeare: The insolence of office.

Queen: O yes. A true line. Office is an insolence. I wrote another down *[looks at her paper]* ‘Who would fardels bear to grunt and sweat under a weary life’

Shakespeare: Yes, your majesty.

Queen: Perhaps if should be 'bear the fardels of Office' and I have another note here. 'To be or not to be? That is the question' A strange question.

Shakespeare: Yes, your majesty.

Queen: Do you have an answer to that question Mr Shakespeare?

Shakespeare: The question is the answer. And perpetually so. It is a mixed answer.

Queen: O these deliberations we'll continue another time. This enigma pursues philosophy. I need the dark of sleep and a kingdom is impatient for food to what your Hamlet said – 'grow fat and feed more worms.' Goodnight gentlemen. O Mr Shakespeare, I thought your Queen Gertrude a little queer.

Shakespeare: A Queen could be queer, if it is in the nature of monarchy.

Queen: O – yes, yes – quite so. Quite so. Goodnight, goodnight.

[Anne1: The Queen leaves]

Hunsdon: I was suitably impressed. I have a friend who recommended your dramatic art. You touched me.

Shakespeare: Thank-you, my lord.

Hunsdon: And you sweet Ophelia, what is your name, gentle boy?

Emilia: *(looking away)* Er...James, sir

Hunsdon: Don't be shy, dear boy.

Shakespeare: O but he is, my lord. As a kitten.

Hunsdon: A kitten. Don't be afraid; I'm no dog.

Shakespeare: No, of course not, your lordship

Hunsdon: Strange how the actor in him makes him what he is not.

Shakespeare: Thus is art larger than life, your lordship.

Hunsdon: But not death, it seems. Your Hamlet dies.

Shakespeare: It is art that kills him.

Hunsdon: Sweet boy, don't be shy. Come, look this way. Such a pretty head should not look away.

Emilia: I'm timid sir.

Hunsdon: Hear, the boy speaks. He recalls another; he looks a little like Henry, Earl of Southampton. You know the Earl well Mr Shakespeare. He has shown me some of your sonnets. Fine verse.

Shakespeare: He does look a little like the Earl.

Hunsdon: That one sex could cross over to another like James here! You have powdered him well, and suitably made delicate the rougher parts. He could very well pass for a girl. Indeed has a similar aspect and aura as a friend...

Shakespeare: Your lordship, beg your pardon, but we must retire and as weary as after the performance, we are, we must work backstage still further into the night.

Hunsdon: O I do understand. And I too must retire. But I will see you again Mr Shakespeare. I have a prediction that your play Hamlet will do more than one round. I predict two or three before obscurity closes in on it. Plays, unlike empires, do not survive long.

Shakespeare: Would that it could last that many rounds.

Hunsdon: Mr Shakespeare, goodnight. James, dear boy, you have aroused my curiosity. You are two sexes in one or so art has made you. Which gender do you prefer?

Emilia: Male, sir.

Hunsdon: O males make common misery. If we could become both there might be hope. I myself prefer the company of those that are two faced, so to speak.

Shakespeare: There may then be double torment.

Hunsdon: O Sir, your wit! If we were two in one body perhaps we would not suffer – what did you call it – ‘the pangs of unrequited love?’

Shakespeare: Love would then be two faced, unfocused with four eyes.

Hunsdon: O Mr Shakespeare, your riddles! Goodnight poet. And James dear boy, come visit me. I will send you my address. *(he kisses her)* Do visit me.

Emilia: Perhaps I will, sir

[Anne1: Hunsdon leaves]

O Will, this was performance after the play!

Shakespeare: A farce following tragedy.

Emilia: I escaped recognition. O what jest!

Shakespeare: He was curious at so strange a boy.

Emilia: He was gender confused.

Shakespeare: Engendering fancies as he mused.

Emilia: O I fooled him, my capricious lord! I think he thought my Ophelia fine. What do you think? Will, did I not perform it well?

Shakespeare: You did. So well to play her ill.

Emilia: Then I was in her heart?

Shakespeare: In her heart of hearts as you are in mine.

Emilia: O Will , don't you think we're a fine pair?
Your Hamlet is my Ophelia's despair.
O if only life could be endless illusion's stage
The queen was impressed with you too.

Shakespeare: She was indeed. Her majesty has a fine perception.

Emilia: She thought me a wonder! O she praised me! Me!

Shakespeare: You warrant the praise.

Emilia: O Will shall we do this again?

Shakespeare: It is a risk.

[Anne1: Henry leaves]

Shakespeare: If I agree, will you see less of Hunsdon?

Emilia: See less of him?

Shakespeare: Yes. I cannot bear you together.

Emilia: O Will stop it!

Shakespeare: Stop it? How can I forebear? This is love's nectar laced with gall! If I drink it, it is double sour. I see an ox with a peacock!
A crow with a dove. A wolf with a fawn.

Emilia: Hunsdon is not a wolf! I a fawn? You are the fawning.

Shakespeare: A wolf with a periwig, powdered with pampered pretension. He loves you not!

Emilia: An ox, crow, wolf!

Shakespeare: His animal parts rule him. He loves you with his grosser part and wipes it with his loin cloth.

Emilia: Yes, that be yourself!

Shakespeare: His heart does not sweat blood.

Emilia: Love not me. I am ephemeral.

Shakespeare: Your eternal summer shall not fade.

Emilia: I am dark as winter and as wasting.

Shakespeare: No, no heavenly one...

Emilia: But hellishly taught as you say.

Shakespeare: No, no...

Emilia: O go to your marriage bed. Or to a bawd to cool off your prick!

Shakespeare: Don't barter love for a base gilded canopy!

Emilia: Goodnight Will.
I am so tired. I must to bed. To bed. Goodnight. (*she leaves*)

Shakespeare: Not to his, my dark love. (*he leaves*)

[Anne1: Act 2, Scene 4. The stage at the theatre – enter Anne.]

Anne: Will...!

Shakespeare: Anne...[*Shakespeare enters*]

Anne: I have been waiting for you. Were you in town?

Shakespeare: Yes. I'm sorry if sometimes I am absent.

Anne: Husband, I understand when separation comes.
These gaps, though frequent serve some end.

Shakespeare: Anne, your understanding makes you worthier than myself.

Anne: London's your field and plow.
Stratford's our rock. You need be here to unfold a little glory.
The wage of virtue is life. Seeds sown upon a
Rock grow not. Therefore your fertile mind needs London and
separation.

Shakespeare: Anne, I thank you.

Anne: Will, these past weeks in London, I have noticed an altered
Will to the William of Stratford.
Is London so bent on alteration?
O Will I do love you still.

Shakespeare: Yes, Anne. And I you.

Anne: You do feel something.

Shakespeare: But Anne I said it.

Anne: Say it.

[Anne2: Say it!!]

Shakespeare: I love you. Your Will loves you.

Anne: In Stratford I am constant as the candlelight. I wait for your
return and I expect you.

Shakespeare: Anne, as the years return, so I to you in summer Stratford.

Anne: You will not abandon me?

Shakespeare: Not you, Anne.

Anne: I fear you might. There are temptations here, beauties. Even the
males have pampered loveliness.

Shakespeare: The males?

Anne: Yes, as an example, that young man James who plays Ophelia. He has a feminine beauty. Though I have not observed him without his makeup.

Shakespeare: O James-the Ophelia to my Hamlet.

Anne: You are not attracted to him?

Shakespeare: Who James? Why no!

Anne: But perhaps Ophelia – then?

Shakespeare: She's but an imaginative being.

Anne: Yes, a fantasy that teases fanciful love or shallow infatuation.

Shakespeare: Ophelia does not exist in flesh.

Anne: Then let her remain in the imagination where she cannot tempt you. Do not impose fantasy onto flesh. That's a fool's undoing. Will, tomorrow I shall leave for Stratford.

Shakespeare: Anne, stay.

Anne: No, I fear I am distraction here. Remember that your true heart lies in Stratford as do your children. And the owl perched behind our house waits for your return that you do not become a prey for other birds of winged folly as did Icarus. Will, I know you shall weather the tempest and judge rightly- something I cannot force on you with all my tears or anguish.
[She begins to leave]

[Anne2: Embrace him.]

[Anne returns to embrace him and leaves]

Shakespeare: She knows!
She plumbs depths with her stillness
While my fugitive fire sings but surface!
Her I have neglected, who teaches wisdom's torch to burn bright!
Both their flames burn conscience in double illumination!
What a rogue knave am I!
Descending a stairwell to a rank cellar,
Crawling with serpents, vipers and carrion,
and there, among wine bottles, drunk with Eurydice's image,
I grope with Medusa's snaky pale stare!

[Anne1: Act 2, Scene 5. The stage is set. Enter Emilia, the poet and muse.]

Emilia: Virtue, to what end?

Shakespeare: Your soul's end. These flames of your nature will light after flames.

Emilia: You would save my soul? Purify me?
I am past purification. How can I be sure God does exist?
Or if he does exist, he puts me on this earth – alone – mother
and father dead without provision. A husband derelict –
abandoned without familial care – crawling for comfort and

shelter. Where does a woman as I find material peace, when a woman cannot make provision for herself but as a bawd or mistress? What gentleman would marry a commoner as myself? I sacrifice love for provision.

Shakespeare: Your lord will one day be rid of you!

Emilia: I am a woman stranded on an island between countries. This body is all I have to bait and boat my food. Or I drown!

Shakespeare: I would rise like Neptune high pitched in love,
In melody that would rescue his stricken mermaid
Through the endless mansions of the sea
My love would call, echoing for you.
A castle of coral would I for you construct,
My stricken mermaid would nurse and attend
And I the wounded fisher-king would end your curse.

Emilia: You are in love with imagination, not me.
I warm to your spirit,
Your transporting poetry that echoes in me.
You have inspired my own poetry
But your inflated love does not inflate my purse.

Shakespeare: Again is come the curse.

Shakespeare: Have you ever really loved anyone?

Emilia: Many years ago I did love a gentleman who in the chequered maze, finally taught me to beware of love. The gentleman being as gentle as flint. Why they place gentle before man is a hard mystery.

Shakespeare: We are all knaves, believe none of us. Especially your Lord Hunsdon.

Emilia: And you, William?
O you men do not really know what bitter beings you can make of us. You wheedle, flatter and seduce and leave us traduced! You tire, grow impatient then wish to unload us midstream after you've had your ride. Unloading your saddles, you would horse around, have your balls and then plead innocent, turn fault on its head, wash your Judas hands of us and then with open-eyed impudence claim: "O it was you that wanted it, that tempted me, I only followed the course of my prickly nature!"

Shakespeare: Then past hope am I?

Emilia: Enough! Enough! I must go. Must go!

Shakespeare: O your conscience makes a coward of you to so flee.

Emilia: And further, my lord will be taking me abroad.

Shakespeare: Abroad. Away from London? When?

Emilia: To Milan in due course.

Shakespeare: And you following? No!

Emilia: Not following, but at his side.

Shakespeare: O Emilia, don't leave, I implore you!

Emilia: You have your wife.

Shakespeare: My wife. My luckless wife!

Emilia: But would you leave her?

Shakespeare: Leave her? Anne?

Emilia: Yes. Propose the scene: If I did return your Samson love and I your Delilah would you bring down your home for me? Leave Anne, to abscond?

Shakespeare: If you did love both me and my poverty.

Emilia: Would you leave her then? House, children?

Shakespeare: I...would.

Emilia: And God? Forget you Him? You believe in Him. Then you must obey. I love you not. And I shall leave for Milan.

Shakespeare: O you have the witch's wiles. You extract an answer then flout me with reproof. Yes, I would leave Anne – the truth – though Anne be a hundred times in merit.

Emilia: Why, leave a good woman for - a witch - like me?
Life's short; we'll both one day be dead. I will be forgotten, you shall be forgotten! We end with worms that will not utter our names. You will have loved me truly by wishing me well and that will end your ill. I can not quit Hunsdon.

Shakespeare: Emilia, he shall be your ruin! Do not leave London.

Emilia: No, it shall be yours if you do not construct another future.

Shakespeare: Stay in London. Don't go. I could not bear it.

Emilia: I must go. O go to your wife. I am done here.

Shakespeare: Stay!

Emilia: I must go. And you must prepare for tonight's performance. Your Ophelia waits for her Hamlet.

Shakespeare: With you gone, Elsinore will fall upon this city. A town of ghosts if shall become.

Emilia: Farewell.

[Anne1: She leaves]

Shakespeare: Emilia...

[Anne1: Act 2, Scene 6. Shakespeare is at the theatre alone, he reads a letter]

Shakespeare: 'My dear poet. Forgive me but this woman; Emilia whom you know well...forgive my weakness if I come between you... but she has wiles and charms that o'whelmed my green nature. She says that you did ask her to come to me and she did ask advice of your state and in the meddling so quite snared myself.'
Did ask her to come to you? No! Vile! Vile woman! Serpent that slithers between the limbs of beds!

[Anne1: Enter Henry]

Henry: Will, what news?

Shakespeare: O she be a fox on heat! She has drawn the Earl into her web, studied her prey and now wraps him in her tangling sheets! O whore sent to damn! She has set him up against me, kindles his flesh that burns black holes in friendship! This now on top of all else! God!

Henry: Will, now you must rid yourself of her. By this deed that proves that she is unworthy even of your bitterness.

Shakespeare: Henry, how could she have done this?
She has fucked my innocent boy! No shame, no conscience has she that I call – my love.

Henry: This is not love but contagion!

Shakespeare: She has not touched you? Not you?

Henry: No, Will, no

Shakespeare: You would not lie to me? Henry?

Henry: Not I.

Shakespeare: Suspicion's superfluous when deeds are already done!
O ye angels help me!

Henry: Calm, calm tossed spirit.

[Anne1: Henry leaves. Act 2, Scene 7, the stage, he is alone, again.]

Shakespeare: O her offence is rank!
My poor Earl!
Your wealth will not arm you when she will assault with the invisible
army of her flesh. My fond, once innocent Earl!
Heartbreak and misery!
And I will stand dispossessed of both, he and she.
From where comes this woman? From heaven given and hell sent!
From Italian origin. This be not a Juliet from Italy! Musical! O she plays men well and fingers our piping lute and we follow to the dumb show!

[Anne1: Enter Emilia]

Emilia: Will, you send for me again?

Shakespeare: Emilia, why, why – the Earl?

Speak bitch! Speak! Answer the charge!

Emilia: The Earl desires my company.

Shakespeare: You have corrupted him! He is my innocent flower.

Emilia: How can a woman corrupt a man when man is already base?

Shakespeare: He's but my boy. Not yet touched manhood.

Emilia: Then by my touch he turns so. It is not your affair!

Shakespeare: I am your affair!

Emilia: Not quite so, my friend.

Shakespeare: My love...do not harm...this boy. You'll unhinge him!

Emilia: O I do not harm but would heal.

Shakespeare: When will you quit London?
What says your lord paramour?

Emilia: He will surely go to Milan.

Shakespeare: You are roped to your master's ship, as you say, and must blow to his wind. And then, what of my Earl?

Emilia: Upon my return I shall connect with him.

Shakespeare: And disconnect from me?

Emilia: We may all connect. As is nature's mingling desire.
We are elemental as nature and as basic. You know that, Will.

Shakespeare: Then are we but base elements?
O the Earl – why pluck this flower? Why did you corrupt him?
Deceive me? You godless bitch! You are deception's masterpiece!

Emilia: You are drunk.

Shakespeare: Yes, with you dark lady. And your departure will not sober me.

Emilia: Farewell Will.

Shakespeare: *O mia donna*, dark magician or witchcraft's wily daughter, how did you bewitch me? What occult spell, potion did you dispense to curdle my reason to jelly.

Emilia: Calm yourself! Let me go... We cannot lie further on this same bed. It would be the further fall of you...

Shakespeare: Something is rotten in the state of love!

Emilia: Will, take possession.

Shakespeare: All is conceit and deception!

Emilia: It will pass.

Shakespeare: O break this spell that you have cast!! Do not leave without breaking this curse or I be broken entirely.

Emilia: I cursed you not.

Shakespeare: Can love then curse so unkindly? Where once I was safe with one shadow I now breed chimeras of you

Emilia: Will I am leaving. I cannot help you.

Shakespeare: Then go! Leave this leper licking at love's door.

Emilia: We shall not again meet.

Shakespeare: Meet? – but not of flesh, muse of my imagination.

[Emilia leaves]

Shakespeare: Emilia! Emilia! Come back! Emilia!
Never again to see you? Return?
Never to return? To lie with only a memory of you?
O Earl what phantoms await you! But to dream, to dream...

[He begins to fall asleep. Enter the spirit of Titania]

[Anne1: William, awoken...]

Shakespeare: Who are you that my spirit- sense does behold?
That come with illuminating candle?

Titania: I am Titania, Queen of Fairies.

Shakespeare: Fairy queen, so fair are you. I do recognise you?

Titania: Poet, I was your own creation.

Shakespeare: This is unexpected. Why do you venture from the invisible?

Titania: I call upon my unhappy mortal.
Nightly in faraway woodlands do
I hear your cries, moans, mute pain
That penetrate the veil, your world impervious be
But not ours, registering the notes of every
Heartsong or dirge. Here human suffering
Becomes divine and we fly to its relief
By taking it upon ourselves as did Our Lord.

Shakespeare: I do not wish to add more room to His house of pain.

Titania: Unmerited pain we credit by His account.
Your suffering ripples to this realm. By purpose propelled.

Shakespeare: Purpose? The charge against Him is sorrow and evil.

Titania: His mysteries are beyond the scope of human reason.
We lowly spirits occasionally glimpse the glory:
The interaction of everything with all things.
The blade of grass with the blade of battle.
The fallen bitten apple with the baby buds.

Mysteries intertwined, interlacing
In slow ascension; all things dark becoming fairer.

Shakespeare: And this dark love of mine? Pray speak of this.
When shall it end? The torment of thorns
That the fair rose holds?

Titania: Love is the resplendent rose
Whose flowering in paradise
Is nurtured by tears, as yours,
Through tears, you'll sight true love's eyes.

[Enter spirit of Romeo]

Shakespeare: Who are you?

[Anne1: John? Henry?]

This be Romeo.

Romeo: Am He. From another realm I come
To assist you.
You who could write my fate
But cannot understand your own,
Therefore I in dream reciprocate
And give my vision for your repair.
I who suffered the pangs of
Both love unrequited and granted,
Now swoon to a love constant and clear
Where grief cannot touch nor time decay.
By endless earthly love was I both
Lifted and finally self-slain

When love was a poison in my hand.
Therefore I drank and sought death
To follow my beloved, whom I thought fled.
You suffer what forbidding fate grants not,
I, what it first did not, then granted its joy
And the fear of its loss. And we bore
The feuding hate, that our love did quell.
Therefore, we paid the price to conquer hate,
When our love became the sacrifice.

Shakespeare: O well I know the cost that earned your present place!

Romeo: Love underwrites all mysteries. You poet, only but scratch what
here I know: all grains of sand number but the tip of beginning.

Shakespeare: Indeed. I scratch surface on the sands of time.
Where time is a dream of a dream.

[Enter spirit of Mark Antony]

[Anne1: Hunsdon!?!]

Shakespeare: Are you not Mark Antony? Speak.

Antony: Not love alone but lonely love
That wanders in grieving solitude.
You its votary, that spirals down with pained longing;

And the fair aspect, forever out of reach,
 That would hold the world holding her hand,
 And her conquering eyes would lay low an empire
 In yourself. Their power greater than Caesar's.
 And I who surrendered a hard empire, riches,
 Imperial command, the world's fawning at
 My feet was too brought lowly to kiss the
 Hem of Love's Highness. Nothing but Love,
 Had the power to undo Antony and break
 The stony heart of war.
 I followed a barge of burnished dreams
 And left in shame the strongman behind
 But a greater Antony did I find:
 Incurring the world's shame, dishonour
 The hollow trumpets of martial music and barbarity
 Did I shun for that invisible vision.
 Through her eyes, I saw the world's falsity
 Myself as false, till love, through her, showed
 My own true self, that the barbarous world despises,
 Heeds not, but its lust for worthless prizes.
 To love or not to love, I chose love or it chose me
 In double death was I reborn and in this choosing chose,
 To be.

Shakespeare: You chose wisely if this being is your present state.

Romeo: The free chain that links us all in the star tossed light.

Titania: A link of flowers in the magic summer night.

All three: Thus in gain or loss
 In love found or lost,
 Ever does it redeem the mortal dross.
 In joy or pain ever does its story reflect our domain:
 To feel the god beating in the human heart
 Is to touch God's form where all mysteries start.

[They leave and Shakespeare returns to sleep and then slowly awakens]

Shakespeare: What was this pageant ? But a dream?
 As insubstantial as air or thought
 Yet the very stuff and embodiment of life
 As air and thought renders life possible;
 O this is more potent than my dull senses
 Could attest to or devise. Yet I feel the
 Touch and substance of the invisible
 That the tangible world pales to nothing.
 O what has Love, through pain, disclosed?
 A carved path to a forgotten realm
 Like a sculptor who cuttingly wounds hard marble
 And renders from base earth a glimpse of eternity!

***[Anne1: Act 2 Scene 8. A room at the Stratford home.
 Shakespeare and Anne are alone, together]***

Anne: O Will, these months so slow that have passed since London and I
 waiting for nights such as these. For now you are home, Will,
 home. Such a night as this makes absence bearable.

Shakespeare: Yes Anne. As the seasons return, so I to you in summer Stratford.

Anne: Perhaps one day, we shall abide permanently after your retirement.

Shakespeare: Many years before that.

Anne: But it shall be. And we shall together witness the darling buds of May. Did you enjoy supper?

Shakespeare: Yes. Food fit for Her Majesty.

Anne: Are you happy Will?

Shakespeare: Yes. To be alive is contentment enough.

Anne: Then lets grow old together contentedly. *[pause]*
Time passes. Your sonnets speak so much of its passing.

Shakespeare: We have no defence against it save eternity or perhaps Excalibur.

Anne: Sometimes when you are sleeping, I think on your sonnets as I watch you.

Shakespeare: O it be the type of poetry that could put one to sleep.

Anne: O you should be a court-jester.

[Anne2: She Yawns and closes her eyes]
It's been a tiring day.

Shakespeare: Rest a little, Anne.

Anne: Read me that summer sonnet Will. Read me by your sonnet.

[Anne2: She begins falling into a light sleep]

Shakespeare: 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed.'

[Anne2: Emilia Bassano enters, as a memory]

'But thy eternal summer shall not fade' *[repeats]*
'Yes thy eternal summer shall not fade'

[Anne2: She slowly disappears]

"Emilia!"

[Anne2: Kiss her.]

[He kisses her then joins Emilia]

'Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;
Nor shall Death brag when thou wonder'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:
So long as men can breath, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.'

[Anne slowly awakens, she sees Shakespeare and Emilia in an embrace. She carries the candle to CS]

[Anne1: THE END]

[Anne1 blows out the candle. Blackout]