

Shakespeare's
DARK LADY

(anatomy of an affair)



By Karen Sunde

Shakespeare's **DARK LADY**

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"(Dark Lady) will be acknowledged a masterpiece."

THE VILLAGER New York

A PLAY in Two Acts for 4 men and 3 women on a Bare Stage.

CHARACTERS:

EMILIA Bassano.....an enchanting musician

WILL Shakespeare.....a rising playwright

HAL.....young Earl of Southampton

DORA.....an earthy servant

RICHARD Burbage.....flamboyant actor manager

HUNSDON.....the craggy Lord Chamberlain

LINDY.....a cocky tavern maid

DOUBLES: Old Man, Waterman, Watch, Old Woman, Dancers, Townspeople.

PRODUCTION HISTORY:

Pacific Conservatory of the Performing Arts – director John C. Fletcher

Abbey National Theatre of Ireland – director Vincent Dowling

Aalborg State Theatre of Denmark – director Wladimir Herman

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COVER PHOTO: *by Tom Smith - Tina Marie Goff and Robert Elliott in John C. Fletcher's production of Dark Lady at Pacific Conservatory of the Performing Arts, CA*

Shakespeare's **DARK LADY**

SETTING. *This world flows on a bare stage – with a trap, draperies, and sometimes, a virginal. England, 1593.*

AT OPENING. *Lively music brings on an Elizabethan pattern dance – winding, flirtatious. Three masked couples. Only WILL and his partner - until she changes - are sharply lit—*

WILL. *(to FIRST WOMAN. dancing).* You move like a whisper. Perhaps you're a sprite.

FIRST WOMAN. What if I am?

WILL. I'll snare you.

FIRST WOMAN. Don't blink or I'm gone.

(FIRST WOMAN spins away to her next partner. EMILIA, masked, dances to join WILL.)

WILL. Your feet barely kiss the ground. You're a sprite.

EMILIA. And you've come to mock us... professional.

WILL. *(off guard).* What... ?

EMILIA. You dance everyday. *(EMILIA spins away.)*

(WILL stands watching her, misses a step. SECOND WOMAN spins into his arms. He picks up the step—)

WILL. Don't dip too low. I'm waiting to gather you.

SECOND WOMAN. You'll gather me. How?

WILL. Closely, my dear. Very tightly.

SECOND WOMAN. You won't know me after.

WILL. No?

(SECOND WOMAN spins away. FIRST WOMAN is there again.)

WILL. Golden hair, blazing cheeks. You won't escape.

FIRST WOMAN. Many have these. You can't keep track.

WILL. I'll remember. Don't doubt me.

(FIRST WOMAN leaves. As the figure changes, EMILIA dances again with WILL.)

WILL. You've cheated... and have the advantage.

EMILIA. That's natural enough. But I never cheat.

WILL. Will I know you later?

EMILIA. I think not.

WILL. I insist.

EMILIA. I've one short message.

WILL. Your message?

EMILIA. Don't use Italy again.

(EMILIA spins away; WILL stares after her. The circling goes on; WILL regains his place, dancing with the SECOND then the FIRST WOMAN, but now he is riveted, no longer flirting. When EMILIA returns, WILL takes her arm, and steers her out of the dance.)

WILL. Shall we unmask?

EMILIA. I think not.

WILL. You know me.

EMILIA. I think not.

WILL. You said that I dance...

EMILIA. Yes. At the end of each play.

WILL. You do know me then. *(EMILIA smiles, but says nothing.)* And what of Italy?

EMILIA. You don't know Italy.

WILL. Oh?

EMILIA. Your Italy is a pale painted canvas.

WILL. And yours?

EMILIA. Mine is life.

(EMILIA leaves WILL.)

(WILL pulls off his mask, begins to follow EMILIA, but is stopped by HAL, young Earl of Southampton, who hurries toward WILL—.)

HAL. What do you think?

WILL. *(Looking after EMILIA).* Exquisite. Provocative witch, though. You're sure she asked about me?

(EMILIA looks back at WILL, then is gone. HAL has seen her—.)

HAL. Not that one. Good grief, Will. It's *that* one. The red-hair, in blue. She's giddy to meet you.

WILL. My mistake. Sorry. I forgot which.

(WILL looks to the place EMILIA disappeared.)

HAL. The redhead's been taking your new poem to bed.

WILL. "Adonis"? Then how do you know it's not you she's after?

HAL. Well, me she can't have, can she?

WILL. *(sighing)*. Oh, my child. Lead on; I'm for it.

HAL. Bring her into the library then. Marlowe's going to read something.
And don't sneak out early. Essex is coming. I'll introduce you.

(HAL and WILL exit one way as the swirling, also exiting DANCERS deposit papers, pen, a bench for a bed. And morning light streams—

(There is a large lump in the "bed." EMILIA's gown is thrown in a heap. DORA, a servant, enters quietly with a bowl of rose water, sets it down, pulls a drape, straightens the gown. EMILIA, the lump, speaks—)

EMILIA. All right, then - what rhymes with "rushes"?

DORA. *(starting)*. Oh, my life! Y'give me the frights.

EMILIA. If you're going to be about, you might as well be useful.

DORA. Haven't had your feet down, have ya?

EMILIA. No, I've been good, good, good.

DORA. And well y' might, well y'might be.

EMILIA. And I'm altogether starved waiting for you.

DORA. Here now. Take this and chew it carefully. *(Hands EMILIA a crust of bread.)*

EMILIA. *(takes a bite)*. Uch... it's dry.

DORA. Better 'at way. Just a bit at a time. *(Watches her.)* That's it. How y'feel?

EMILIA. I won't know till my feet are down, will I?

DORA. All right, easy then. *(DORA helps EMILIA sit up.)*

EMILIA. What a goddamned nuisance. Momma mia!

DORA. Never y' mind, never y' mind.

EMILIA. *(stands, feeling pale)*. Well, so far...

DORA. Have a bit more.

EMILIA. *(nibbles crust)*. Never thought I'd be up to something so... silly.

DORA. Works though, doesn't it.

(EMILIA walks, testing herself, begins to smile—.)

EMILIA. Yes, I think so. I think... nothing's coming up. No nausea at all. I really feel... fine. *(Spins around, starts singing in Italian.)*

DORA. Careful now... No blood?

EMILIA. *(dashes to papers, studies one).* Umhum. *(Negative.)* And today is three days past the third month. You'd better have a big breakfast waiting. Fresh milk, too. Did you give me a rhyme for "rushes"?

DORA. Leave that now, and dress. *(Spreads skirt for EMILIA to step into.)*

EMILIA. *(absent-mindedly, as she steps in).* I just want to get these two lines down. They woke me, throbbing in my head like a katydid. And it's a treacherous maze, my head. Some of the poor words only come through it in Italian. I'll wear the white sleeves. English for "desidirio" is "wish." Wish.

DORA. Oop, oop. Have t'be lettin' this out, m'lady. Another month n'you'll burst right through!

EMILIA. *(washing with rose water - face, neck, arms, chest).* Ummmm, that smells so good. *(Suddenly).* I know! I have it! "Dah da, dah da..." *(Beats out iambic line on her fingers.)* Aha! That's good, that's very good, Miss Emilia. Bella, bella ma carissima. *(Singing.)* That's even good in English, myyyyy lady.

(DORA stands waiting. EMILIA runs to have her bodice fastened, sleeves pinned on.)

DORA. *(testing).* My lord should arrive today?

EMILIA. Umhmmm. With news of all his little chicks.

DORA. Do you plan t'tell him... about yours?

EMILIA. Of course. Why not? He loves me, doesn't he? He'll be happy if I am. *(Pause.)* Do you miss Lady Hunsdon very much, Dora?

DORA. 'Course not. Not a bit.

EMILIA. Don't be proud, Dora. It doesn't become you.

DORA. If she wants t'think I'm a thief, so much the better for 'er.

EMILIA. Not the children either, not a bit?

DORA. They's all growed but two, n'the little 'uns... well, I think on 'em now n'then.

EMILIA. Of course. Trussing up his paramour is not quite the same.

(EMILIA stands stiffly, being “prepared” like a mannequin – may pivot slowly – while her story bubbles up from insides no mannequin has.)

You know, I don’t feel so... invaded anymore. At first, remember how I raged? No, no. First I didn’t believe it. You knew. You told me. But I couldn’t believe it. Wouldn’t. Nothing had ever been mine, except me. I had me, and me I could trust. I knew I was strong. I had wit, and my will. What became... what I did with my life... would depend on that. *(Pause.)* So how could this happen? How could something take me, against my will, and twist my life? No. Stop my life, stop it, turn it about completely and say to me: “there. Now if you want to go on, go ahead... but it’s on new terms. Entirely.” *(Pause.)* Rage. Wild frantic rage. My own body had betrayed me. I ran. Raced out of the house, rode into the brittle brush and crusting snow, far. But nowhere could be far enough. Wind smacked my rough cheeks. On the rocky edge of a hill I beat myself numb. But the bit was in place. Like a wild horse caught, I shrieked and thrashed in a narrow stall, without hope. The enemy was inside. *(Pause.)* So I grew still. And in stillness I knew... how little power, how little control, how small my choices really are. What to eat, what to wear. My brothers work every day making music, while I... it was ridiculous to think that my life mattered or... could be worth something to the world. *(Pause.)* So then the invasion proceeded without further violence. Peacefully. And my mind was free to wonder about my invisible, implacable enemy. A force... minute, silent, unseen, yet overwhelming. And growing, swelling, every day more surely becoming... something. Something I will recognize. *(Pause.)* It’s so curious, such a quiet... mystery, that now, even when I’m angry, it’s amazing... just to wonder about it.

(Silence, then suddenly EMILIA “comes to life” again—.)

We’ll be very gay tonight, won’t we? It will be a celebration.

(Lights change. EMILIA and DORA exit.)

(RICHARD, actor/manager, enters grandly, as though moving downstage through an art-filled gallery. WILL comes after him, stops upstage to stare at an unseen unicorn tapestry. A virginal (or facsimile), with a candlestick on it, is placed as they speak.)

WILL. My god...

RICHARD. *(without looking at WILL)* Straighten your cloak, Will.

WILL. (*from upstage, distracted*). Ummmmh?

RICHARD. It's sliding off your shoulder again.

WILL. (*looks at himself*). How did you know?

RICHARD. Come here.

WILL. Just look at this unicorn, Richard. Where do you think...?

RICHARD. Come here.

WILL. (*moving downstage*). It's incredible. The things he has! How would you like to be my Lord Chamberlain, cousin to my Lady Queen?

RICHARD. (*straightens Will's cape*). Look as if you didn't notice.

WILL. But I'm getting drunk on it. I can't help it.

RICHARD. Settle down.

WILL. Look. Look there. Just think what we could do with those draperies.

RICHARD. Assume the role.

WILL. And the gold sconces? My god.

RICHARD. This is every day to him. Like a stroll down Cheapside after dinner.

WILL. Slap me once, and I'll be all right.

RICHARD. Breathe deeply. (*Pause.*) Now.

WILL. What do we say?

RICHARD. It's just business. Like a load of oranges. Think of what we've got to sell.

WILL. Yes. Why he needs us.

RICHARD. Who we are.

WILL. Yes. (*Pause.*) You're sure he saw "Henry Six"?

RICHARD. He sent me that dagger.

WILL. I thought he didn't come after all.

RICHARD. No. I spotted him right off.

WILL. (*teasing*). Counting the gallery?

RICHARD. It was important.

WILL. He'll be impressed to meet you.

RICHARD. He won't know your poems, but still...

WILL. He's a tough old soldier. Just remind him of your Talbot. That'll be enough.

RICHARD. Right. *(They draw themselves up, waiting.)* I think he's an ordinary fellow.

WILL. The great ones always are.

(Beat. And then: HUNSDON, craggy Lord Chamberlain, enters—)

HUNSDON. Ah... Master Talbot! Saints damn us all, but it's a glorious honor y'bestow on this old soldier.

(WILL and RICHARD exchange looks.)

RICHARD. My pleasure, my lord, entirely mine. And again, my thanks for the exquisite weapon.

HUNSDON. *(eagerly, moving to them)* Ha, ha. Has it come into use, then?

RICHARD. The very next performance. We had to dull it, of course.

HUNSDON. A'course, a'course. Bleedin' slick blade if ever I saw one.

RICHARD. May I present my colleague, the author of the "Henry the Sixth" that you admired.

HUNSDON. Aah, 'n the honor multiplies faster'n conies in a bush.
Congratulations, sir. You have captured to the last point the fighting man's spirit.

WILL. I'm pleased that you...

HUNSDON. And all three. You've written all three a'those "Henry" plays?

WILL. I have, yes. Except for the... *(RICHARD hits WILL's arm to stop him.)*

HUNSDON. Magnificent. Extraordinary. Excuse me, won't y'please?

(HUNSDON crosses upstage, beckons to someone offstage.)

RICHARD. *(softly)*. It goes well.

WILL. *(softly)*. Get to the company.

RICHARD. Pleasantries first. Don't rush.

WILL. I get nervous talking nonsense.

RICHARD. Be calm. It may be life-blood to us, but not to him. If he decides to come along, it's for the glamor.

(EMILIA enters, is met by HUNSDON, who brings her to meet RICHARD and WILL)

HUNSDON. My dear. It's with a great pleasure I bring y'to these two fellow artists. Master... *(Looking at WILL.)*

RICHARD. Shakespeare.

HUNSDON. *(to RICHARD)*. And... Master Talbot.

WILL. Uhh, Burbage, my lord. It's Burbage.

HUNSDON. Aha. (*Laughs.*) A'course, now. I've confused you w'the soldier. Now. Give a creakin' old man space t'clear his head. (*Pointing to RICHARD.*) This... is the actor Burbage, sometime performer a'the soldier Talbot. Is it straight now? (*ALL laugh.*)

RICHARD. Exactly so, my lord. But give me leave to hope I may once more confuse you?

HUNSDON. Confuse me... once more? Ah-oh, with another soldier, y'mean. With another fine soldier in a play. I hope y'may. Yessir, I hope it. Masters both, this is my darlin' friend, Emilia Bassano, a most accomplished artist herself - a musician.

RICHARD. Ah, of the Bassanos at court?

EMILIA. Yes, sir. My family... my brothers and uncles all play.

HUNSDON. 'N my everlasting gratitude to our late King Henry... who had the blastin' good sense t'raid Italy for its flowers.

EMILIA. You speak with a pretty tongue tonight.

HUNSDON. I am inspired, my flower, by the company.

EMILIA. But I think you may have business to speak of. May I sit aside?

HUNSDON. And play, my dear. Grace us, will y'please.

RICHARD. Our business is to lure my lord back to the world of theatre. By all means, play, my lady. You may give our words the pressure of song.

EMILIA. I doubt you'll need me, sir. My lord is easily seduced. (*ALL laugh*)

HUNSDON. Behave, Emilia.

(EMILIA moves to sit at the virginal, begins playing softly as conversation continues. WILL watches her.)

RICHARD. Our business is to woo you, my lord. We are convinced that it is an extraordinary moment for the theatre. Even in spite of the opposition of the Puritans, you yourself witnessed the effect of our "Henry the Sixth."

HUNSDON. Aye, aye. That I did.

RICHARD. It spoke directly to the people.

HUNSDON. Aye. It lit a spark. That rusted old story...

RICHARD. They took fire. That old story of Talbot in France reminded them of Essex now.

HUNSDON. Y'mean... because their hearts were with Lord Essex in France...

RICHARD. The theatre gave a... voice... to their precise feeling, even the instant before they knew they felt it, and made it a cause for celebration.

HUNSDON. It may be true. They wept. All together – myself as well. T'was an amazing thing.

RICHARD. And we actors knew... for the first time, what the great ancient theatre must have been. When every citizen came... to cheer his own glory, to tremble at the sins he feared, to know at last that bravery in truth and a right State will triumph.

HUNSDON. Hear, hear!

RICHARD. We've come to you... because we want to be more permanent. We think the time has come. We want to raise the quality and status of our troupe. We want to become what we call... a company. As important to the city as its choirs, as solid as a guild. And to lead us, at our head, we need a great man: noble, renowned, above all, sensitive. An admired representative of the arts.

HUNSDON. *(pause).* Y'stagger me, Master Burbage. Come... Y'may be too young t'know it, but I kept a troupe a'players some years ago...

(HUNSDON and RICHARD move upstage where they are served drinks.)

(WILL has stayed downstage to watch EMILIA play.)

EMILIA. You don't talk business, Master Shakespeare?

WILL. My way is quieter than Richard's.

EMILIA. You make a team, I think.

WILL. Yes, we do.

(EMILIA continues playing. WILL moves to her. Silence.)

EMILIA. You are very quiet.

WILL. Excuse me. The music. It's...

EMILIA. You like it?

WILL. It's very moving. It carries me... somewhere.

EMILIA. Somewhere you'd rather be?

WILL. No. If there is a heaven at all, it must be... this.

EMILIA. *(laughs lightly).* You tease.

WILL. Not you, I wouldn't.

EMILIA. And I'd do nothing else. We'd have a fine time.

WILL. *(looking at her).* You... I know you, don't I?

EMILIA. Do you?

WILL. *(realizing.)* Your eyes. Italy! You mocked me. You beat me round the bush.

EMILIA. Not I.

WILL. At the May dance. You knew I was an actor.

EMILIA. I was unkind, I'm afraid.

WILL. Yes. And now that I have you, you'll do penance... by teaching me Italian.

EMILIA. *(laughing).* I will?

WILL. *(eagerly).* Tell me about Italy. What is it like there?

EMILIA. How can I? It's too...

WILL. How is it different from here?

(EMILIA stops playing, laughs long. HUNSDON and RICHARD notice.)

RICHARD. Will - tear yourself from the lady. Have a drink with us.

WILL. Too late, my friend. Her music's worked on me. Drinking's superfluous.

HUNSDON. Is she not extraordinary? It's her own composition.

WILL. Is it? Engage her, Richard, immediately. Lord Hunsdon must share her with the world.

(ALL laugh as RICHARD and HUNSDON stroll off—)

RICHARD. *(exiting).* We need someone with the authority to stand between us and the Puritans. It's likely there'll be touring, and...(etc.)

WILL. *(to EMILIA).* Come, answer. Show me Italy.

EMILIA. *(indicates elaborate candlestick with unlit candle).* Watch this candle. Don't look at me. Are you watching it?

WILL. Yes.

EMILIA. *(quiet, hypnotically).* It's so elegant; the jewels. The line. The glittering. But cold. Like a portrait of Elizabeth. Without... this.

(EMILIA reaches for a light, and lights the candle. The flame takes on life between them.)

This is the difference. *(Beat.)* You're not watching the candle.

WILL. But I am.

EMILIA. No. You can only... watch its flame.

WILL. England has jewels, elegance...

EMILIA. But in Italy they're alive... pulsing, warm, breathing, like flesh...
the flesh of a Raphael.

WILL. Now may I look?

EMILIA. Now you must.

WILL. (*Still gazing at the candle flame*). Don't try to tell me we've no flesh.
England's alive. And seized with adventure. The explorations to...

EMILIA. It's the boldness of barbarism. You may grow rich by your
boldness. But unless, with your wealth, a swelling of artistic power
comes along, England will never grow great. Where are your painters,
your sculptors, musicians, poets, your philosophers? A people who do
not cherish those who can express their being in art and in thought are
nothing more than barbaric, do not deserve the name of civilization,
and will not be remembered.

(*At "remembered," EMILIA snuffs the candle, and—*)

This... is all I see here. And it's dead. With it, you've crept back into
the dark age. An unlit candle has no body, no passion, no humanity.

WILL. We do have poets, philosophers...

EMILIA. You have gentlemen who dabble. Which of them has lived by his
art? Who is your best?

WILL. Poet? Spenser.

EMILIA. (*looks at him, surprised*). Yes. He is. And how is he rewarded?
(*Pause. WILL doesn't answer.*) Look at our painters. They are no idle
gentlemen. (*Excited.*) Ucello, son of a barber; Montegna, son of a
farmer; Botticelli, son of a tanner; Da Vinci, illegitimate son of...

WILL. (*smiling*). Has Italy no daughters?

EMILIA. Yes. There is Marietta, daughter of Tintoretto, but he wouldn't let
her... (*Her voice has faded.*) I'm sorry, perhaps your own writing is...

WILL. I've managed to make some money. My poem...

EMILIA. ...is in its second edition.

WILL. You know that?

EMILIA. Yes. I read. (*Pause.*) I'm afraid I'm a little bitter. My Venice...

WILL. Venice.

EMILIA. ...is not so glorious as she was. Your country...

WILL. ...is rising, yes.

EMILIA. ...is powerful. (*Begins low, grows fiery.*) She rides out as a pirate to to master the seas. But you must take care for her. If life... each day... does not look for beauty, graciousness, light above all; if it isn't the greatest than man can achieve, what is it?

(*HUNSDON and RICHARD are strolling back, but EMILIA keeps on.*)

EMILIA. (*becoming impassioned*). Athens ruled the world. Is it power we remember when we think of Athens? Sparta, too, was powerful, bold and in the end triumphant over Athens. Who thanks her? Who remembers? Sparta made nothing beautiful. She had no true life. Her name is cursed. She bore a people whose highest pride was in war, whose gift to the world was destruction, who had better not have breathed at all!

HUNSDON. Emilia, you don't play?

EMILIA. No. Pardon, my lord. (*EMILIA begins to play again.*)

WILL. (*to Hunsdon*). I'm to blame. I asked her about Italy.

HUNSDON. Oho. Careful there. She'll have the spurs off y'in no time, and make a pagan of y'. Or what's worse, a Catholic. (*ALL laugh.*)

WILL. On the contrary, my lord. It may be she's given me my spurs.

RICHARD. I'll have him out of here immediately. A poet's never safe with ladies. A great pleasure, Madame. To our hopeful future, my lord.

HUNSDON. Indeed, sir, indeed.

WILL. Good night, my lord. Good night, gentle siren.

(*EMILIA nods to WILL as she plays. RICHARD and WILL exit.*)

(*HUNSDON tiptoes behind EMILIA and embraces her.*)

HUNSDON. Pretty dove.

EMILIA. Welcome home, my lord.

HUNSDON. Yes. Her majesty fancies me about her now. The Lord Chamberlain is needed in London.

EMILIA. They say plague is rising again.

HUNSDON. If the court moves, I'll take you with me.

EMILIA. Lady Hunsdon...?

HUNSDON. ...is well in Berwick. Our children keep her there. She's content. Come, let me cuddle you. You didn't mind?

EMILIA. The meeting? Of course not.

HUNSDON. Eager fellows. How did they know my exact return?

EMILIA. No doubt they lay in wait.

HUNSDON. What did you think?

EMILIA. They may be right. There's something expectant. Perhaps the theatre will become important.

HUNSDON. What did you think of them? Strange. Off the stage...

EMILIA. ...they seem like people?

HUNSDON. Don't tease. I know you well enough. Yet there's something... I can't quite get round.

EMILIA. I'm glad you realize.

HUNSDON. People... but with a difference.

EMILIA. A difference, yes, but eating and sleeping just the same.

HUNSDON. The writer...

EMILIA. He's a player, too.

HUNSDON. ...was more distant.

EMILIA. Perhaps more deep.

HUNSDON. My wise canary... You glow tonight like sundown in summer.
Or am I mistaking?

EMILIA. I am happy.

HUNSDON. For my return?

EMILIA. That... and something more.

HUNSDON. More than that? It had best be big.

EMILIA. (*laughing*). Oh, it's big, my lord. Like to be bigger yet. Come drink with me. It's a special surprise.

(*EMILIA moves to pour for them,*)

HUNSDON. Now y'have me tingling. Come girl, speak.

EMILIA. How shall I speak? Of bees? Or grasshoppers? Of what pops from eggs?

HUNSDON. Riddles? My brain's not s'limber, girl.

EMILIA. Of what comes of a man and a woman, who come often upon each other... in the night.

HUNSDON. (*worried*). You are merry, woman. You're not speaking of...

EMILIA. Of babies, my lord. (*EMILIA toasts HUNSDON.*)

HUNSDON. *(stunned).* No. *(Beat.)* Do you know what you say? How could you...

EMILIA. How could I not? *(Smiling.)*

HUNSDON. I am old.

EMILIA. But not dead, for sure. And there's a new one of you just...

HUNSDON. Leave me!

EMILIA. *(pause).* You are not pleased. Why not.

HUNSDON. *(intense, low).* It's a catastrophe. A catastrophe!

EMILIA. *(stunned).* I see. All right...

(EMILIA turns and begins to leave.)

HUNSDON. What are you trying to do? Destroy my house?

EMILIA. *(stops and turns back).* Of course not, *(Beat.)* Here.

(EMILIA tears her necklace off, throws it between them, moves toward the exit.)

HUNSDON. Emilia!

EMILIA. And here.

(EMILIA continues tearing at her jewelry and her clothes, ripping and throwing pieces.)

HUNSDON. Emilia!

EMILIA. Have it all.

HUNSDON. Stop, Emilia...

EMILIA. Should I destroy? No. I create!

(EMILIA stands defiant, in complete disarray.)

Build your house! Keep your pets! But when you do, be sure you spay them!!

(EMILIA stomps out. Sharp light change.)

(LINDY the tavern maid's entrance - from a trap-door establishes the Tavern.

RICHARD sits drinking. LINDY scrubs the floor, her butt-end faces the Tavern's entrance. HAL the Earl appears, dressed gorgeously.)

LINDY. *(squalls as she vigorously scrubs—).* See y'wipe 'em 'fore y'step!

HAL. *(disconcerted).* What?

LINDY. *(louder).* Wipe 'em! Don't track none a'yer dung across m'floor.

(LINDY turns, sees HAL, leaps up and scuttles out of his way.)

Ooooh, m'lord. Excuse m'mouth.

(HAL's face twists with vague distaste as he moves toward RICHARD.)

RICHARD. Right honorable Earl! Our humble tavern blushes in your glittering presence.

HAL. Save it, Richard. No speeches. Will isn't here?

RICHARD. Maybe he comes, maybe he doesn't. It's as his black mood serves him. Beautiful coat. You can donate it soon as you're done with it.

HAL. No. You'd put it on a French king. How was today's performance?

RICHARD. Not bad. I was flying: "The Spanish Tragedy". But the house is getting thin; gallery only half full. It must be fear.

HAL. Well, the death count is public – 205 this week. No matter how they try to put it to small pox, people know.

RICHARD. What are you still doing here? Can't you get Essex to whisk you off somewhere safe... like Cadiz? Where the enemy is something you can put a sword through.

HAL. I'm afraid Essex is out of favor this month. He can't raise an ale pot from our lady Queen.

RICHARD. They'll close us down soon. My bones feel it. The Puritans hang like vultures on the death count. I think they pray it rises, then swoop down to finish us off.

HAL. And meantime?

RICHARD. Meantime... things were looking very good. We met Lord Hunsdon and seemed to have him in our hand.

HAL. Hunsdon? Clever. Still, the Queen's fancy is the only shield you have against the Puritans. She fences prettily with their wrath and yields as little as she can.

RICHARD. But first she yields the summer; no performances. Then, none on Sundays till after prayer; next...

HAL. The pressure's strong. There's no fury like morality riled, you know.

RICHARD. Morality, hah! Is as does. Attending a play never made a thief. Nor going to church assured a man was honest.

HAL. So. The warrior Hunsdon will smite the mighty Puritan aldermen?

RICHARD. Yes. Fine. Clever enough. But then he disappeared... left as soon as he came! And Will's in his own private hell, and...

HAL. How far has he gotten with my wedding play?

RICHARD. We talked it through. I'm sure he began. It's set in Athens. I'll be playing Theseus. But now he's off working on something else...
(*WILL enters.*) ...a poem about the rape of someone or other's wife, some hero...

WILL. What an honor, your grace. Lindy, my love, a brimming pot for her Majesty's brightest hope.
(*WILL indicates HAL. LINDY grunts, straggles to her feet, goes down below for drinks.*)

RICHARD. The prodigal has arrived! Did you check the properties for tomorrow?

WILL. What?

RICHARD. "Comedy of Errors." Did you check the props?

WILL. Yes, yes. (*Calls to LINDY.*) And one for me too, little darling.

RICHARD. Where have you been?

WILL. I've failed in my duty. I haven't waited on his gallant lordship.
However did you happen to notice?

HAL. Don't be funny.

WILL. You've got a hundred poets scrambling round your feet. What do you want with me?

HAL. And good ones.

WILL. And good ones, too. How many dedications stick to your hand today?
(*LINDY delivers mugs.*)

Pinch her for me Richard. I haven't the heart.

HAL. He's snarling because of Marlowe.

RICHARD. Marlowe's courting you? Ah – a thousand pardons – courting...
your patronage?

WILL. Take him. Why not; you can't do better. My dear Richard would like to have him, too... for his plays.

RICHARD. With both of you, I'd have it all.

WILL. (*grandly*). Jealousy knows, but will not triumph. (*Simply.*) I adore him too.

RICHARD. Hal was asking about the Theseus play.

WILL. Oh.

HAL. What have you got to show me?

WILL. Nothing.

HAL. Nothing? Will...

WILL. I can't get a clear line. You have to admit the irony is overwhelming.

HAL. How?

WILL. You want a play... a surprise for your mother's wedding, blessed woman. It will soothe things between you, you hope. And the theme? What should it be? Why of course, marriage. Marriage? Just the subject of all her agonies with you.

HAL. See, Richard? So much for my exalted position. I come as a gracious patron and I leave as a punished child.

WILL. You're disgracing your house. (*WILL and HAL argue, overlapping—*)

HAL. Will wants to see me tied as he's tied, throttled hand and foot.

WILL. Marriage? He'd rather spit at his prospective father-in-law, his generous guardian...

HAL. (*to RICHARD*). He pretends to be my slave... full of humility, fearing my anger...

WILL. ...the power second only to the Queen...

HAL. ...but in his real mind he floods me with contempt, and hates the necessity that he, high artist, must sue to me, wealthy child.

(*WILL grabs HAL. RICHARD jumps to prevent WILL's attack, racing to ease the tension—*)

RICHARD. You're mistaken! Will is your slave! In fact... he worships you as everything he'd like to be, and isn't. Young, beautiful, rich. Of course, free from marriage, a daring warrior... oh yes, and above all: an Earl.

HAL. Oh, is that it?

RICHARD. Simple as that. He wants it all, and you're his ideal. Watch for the proof: one of these days, he'll put you in a play, and I'll play you. But you... there you are all the while in the gleaming flesh. A mockery of his dream. (*RICHARD, winded, to WILL—*.) Am I wrong?

(*HAL toys with the ring he will offer WILL.*)

WILL. (*as though he's heard none of this*). So it's clear it has to be about marriage, but you see my dilemma. Now, it occurs to me there should be young people... would-be lovers. But their brains are rattled. They don't know what they want. And they certainly don't know what's good for them. Or rather, the females know, but the males... are completely blind.

HAL. Mother will like that.

WILL. Now she... She, I've decided, should be represented by Hippolyta.
Grand woman: strong, able, aloof, supreme...

RICHARD. But that makes Theseus the brute-conquerer.

WILL. Perfect.

RICHARD. No! The groom can't be a brute.

WILL. Of course not. He brings her 'round wisely. No insults to either side.

HAL. No insults... except to me. That scenario makes me one of the rattle-brained.

WILL. How do you see that, my son?

RICHARD (*getting up to leave*). Well, however you write it, you'd better get started. The marriage won't wait on your "clear" inspiration. Au revoir, my lord. (*Leaving.*) And neither will our season.

WILL (*calls after RICHARD*). But you all may wait on the plague.
(*RICHARD exits. HAL and WILL eye each other, mutually cool off.*)

HAL (*pause*). He's right. You're very black.

WILL. Black. Black... black. As hair, as eyes...

HAL. As lust. He says you're spending time on a poem...

WILL. Don't complain. It'll be the grandest thing ever served up to you. It'll out-Marlowe Marlowe.

HAL. ...about a rape? That's not your usual style.

WILL. Who knows what hell-fire stirs the heart of a man.

HAL. Stop joking.

WILL. Why don't you toddle off to a battle or something?

HAL. What's wrong with you?

WILL. How could you understand. One so young and oh so virginal. If you'd ever tasted a woman...

HAL. That bad. (*Pause.*) What's in your way? She's surely not pure.

WILL. How will I find out? Out of reach, my son, out of reach.

HAL. Like the hero's wife who's raped?

WILL. But oh my god, boy, if there was ever a siren to slay me...

HAL. Who?

WILL. She's cut me like a silent blade.

HAL. Who?

WILL. Her glance is liquid gold. It burns, oh child, it burns.

HAL. Tell me who!

WILL (*toneless, like a refrain*). Emilia, Emilia, Emilia... Bassano. (*Drinks.*)

HAL. I don't think I...

WILL. First at the dance. Then at Lord Hunsdon's. She's a relative or something.

HAL. Bassano?! No, you fool, not a relative – she's his mistress. And *very* well kept. He drapes her like a Venus.

WILL. Worse, then.

HAL. Not at all, who knows? Her family are all musicians to the Queen. On her own, she's only slightly better than you.

WILL. Thank you, my son.

HAL. Besides, you're on equal terms in my circle now. Why not?

WILL. You think so? (*Beat.*) My god, never like this. I never wanted so much to...

HAL. If it's that bad, you might as well try. But what's in it, I can't imagine.

WILL. She just... she... The things she said. She's right for me. I'm sure of it.

HAL. *That* good?

WILL. She's just...

HAL. ...too dark. She's no real beauty.

WILL. Oh?

HAL. All the Venetian delicacies bleach red now.

WILL. Yes. Venetian.

HAL. But if you've that much itch, you might as well venture. To venture is to cure, one way or the other.

WILL. So wise in love, my virgin child?

HAL. Wiser than you it seems, haggard lecher.

WILL (*has an astonishing thought, then broaches it carefully*). Hal, do you think... Could you perhaps... speak to her?

HAL. Oho!

WILL. You could easily visit her.

HAL. You'd trust an innocent like me?

WILL (*swiftly*). You could approach her about the play. She composes.
Maybe... since it's for your mother's wedding, for a court affair, she'd
be willing to... write music for it. Anyway, that's an opening... isn't it?

HAL (*teasing*). Do you want to write lines for me?

WILL. You'll do it!

HAL. Some few speeches praising you. Your hair, your eyes, your...

WILL. (*laughing*). Of course! And you'd better speak it better than
Burbage.

HAL. But only if you leave off that rape and write my wedding play.

WILL. With twenty-nine trumpets. I'll kiss your foot. Dung and all.

HAL (*rising*). We'll meet before I go, and you can check my costume. (*Exit.*)

(EMILIA sitting in the dark in her chamber. DORA comes in.)

DORA. My lady... (*No answer. DORA moves to pull the drape.*)

EMILIA. Leave it.

DORA. We need a bit a' sunset's light.

EMILIA. Oh? Is that what we need?

DORA. There's no use a'so much gloom. You'll hear from 'im when y'hear
from 'im, that's all.

EMILIA. Lying witch.

DORA. (*begins grooming EMILIA*). Ai ai ai, them as spits nasty words sours
their milk.

EMILIA. He's not coming back. He's abandoned me. And you know it.

DORA. M'lord's a good man, with a proper fear of 'is mistress. Both on 'em.

EMILIA. Both?

DORA. There's Lady Hunsdon. She's na'likely t'take happily t'this. A
country lass with her chicks.

EMILIA. You've had no kind words for her before.

DORA. 'N then there's m'lady Queen.

EMILIA. What's she got to do with...

DORA. Ah ah ah... Y'know she'll bear the sight a'no fornication. Nor the
sound neither.

EMILIA. Spy.

DORA. (*paying no attention, DORA combs EMILIA's hair*). Lord knows, she's got her apron full, keepin' her fleshy fresh pullets-in-waiting out a'the way of all her cocky courtiers. So what's she like t'say when a trusted n'tough old rooster like m'Lord Hunsdon is found out.

EMILIA. You're his spy!

DORA. For shame.

EMILIA. You are.

DORA. So now the "abandoned" is going t'be spied on?

EMILIA (*shows DORA a paper*). What's this then?

DORA. How did you...?

EMILIA. Instructions" from my lord. You told me you didn't know where he was!

DORA. You know I can't read m'lady.

EMILIA. Reading is a virtue in a spy, but not required.

DORA. Now, now, no need for such a fuss.

EMILIA. And all a jailer needs is keys. (*Flinging off Dora's attentions.*)
You've caged me. And now you'd like me to sing?

DORA. I'd like you t'look fresh. You've a visitor.

EMILIA. I?

DORA. The young Earl a'South'ampton.

EMILIA. Why?

DORA. He didn't speak a'that t'me, m'lady.

EMILIA. All right. I'll find out.

(DORA exits. EMILIA puts hands to her face and turns about, breathing deeply, then stands looking away as HAL enters—)

HAL (*bowing*). My lady... Emilia.

EMILIA. My lord...

HAL. Hal, please. My name is Hal. (*Pause.*) You look perplexed.

EMILIA. I didn't know that you remembered me.

HAL. Of course. But I... expected you more lively.

EMILIA. I'm sorry. I'm not in my party spirits.

HAL. My poet said that you breathed spring and fire.

EMILIA. Your poet?

HAL. William Shakespeare. *(Pause.)* Do you know him? His “Venus and Adonis” was a great success... light, airy, and yet passionate.

EMILIA. It praised you, I think.

HAL. Yes. But others find him extraordinary, too.

EMILIA. *(slight smile)*. Do they?

HAL. Oh yes. *(Pause.)* Especially ladies. They all adore him. *(Pause.)* You have met him, I believe?

EMILIA. Yes. I have.

HAL. You... liked him?

EMILIA. I thought him... compelling. And while he was here, it was a... happy evening. *(Pause.)* You have some business other than to remind me, I suppose.

HAL. Oh. *(Beat.)* Yes. Yes, I hope to persuade you to... to do some composing for us. It’s a play Master Shakespeare is writing.

EMILIA. *(turning to him)*. A play?

HAL. Yes. And it needs music. It’s for my mother’s wedding. And he... we thought a women’s touch... and a woman acquainted with court affairs... You do compose?

EMILIA. Yes. I’ve written music, for myself, but...

HAL. Will said your playing was exquisite.

EMILIA. I’m glad he thinks so.

HAL. And you’d have all the help you’d want. He has good musicians.

EMILIA. It might be... pleasant. The play is...

HAL. *(rapidly)*. It’s set in Athens. At the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta. Do you know my mother? I want very much to please her. She’s been twelve years a widow, and I...

EMILIA. *(teasing)*. So long... without a man?

HAL. So long without a master, she would say. She was emphatic about her freedom.

EMILIA. And you take after her.

(HAL looks at her sharply.)

What is it?

HAL. How perceptive. That’s the first time I... thought of it that way. You may be right.

EMILIA. Everyone knows you've embarrassed her, refusing a brilliant match. *(Beat.)* You're afraid for your freedom. But not afraid... of women.

HAL. *(looks at her, smiles).* You think not?

EMILIA. You only need to be... sufficiently... intrigued.

HAL. *(pause, without breaking gaze—)* Yes.

EMILIA. *(holds pause just long enough, then—)* You'll stay for supper. We could discuss the music. Yes?

HAL. Of course. Yes.

EMILIA. Good. Dora!

(DORA enters chattering, with drinks tray.)

DORA. Cheers m'heart t'see y'laugh again. Anymore gloom and you'd have soured y'r milk. M'lord...

EMILIA. ...would have wrung me dry altogether. Hush, Dora. We have work to do. Prepare paper and ink. And ring when supper is laid.

DORA. *(skeptically).* A'course, m'lady. It's however you're tellin' me.

EMILIA. Now go. Via, via!

(DORA leaves. EMILIA turns to HAL, glowing.)

We can work here quietly.

HAL. You... are changed.

EMILIA. You found me very gloomy. It is not my habit. I am sorry for it. *(Beat, then impishly—)* Tell me... are you a serious Catholic?

HAL. I... Are you determined to keep me off balance?

EMILIA. Why not? But never mind it. What else should I be, but a wicked papist?

HAL. It's not something one speaks lightly of here.

EMILIA. I was afraid you didn't know that. Your family...

HAL. ...are well known Catholics, and respected for it.

EMILIA. But your mother will prudently marry the other faction. Restoring a balance.

HAL. My mother is devoted to her betrothed.

EMILIA. Of course. But you are rash. "Respected for it" can easily, so easily become "dead for it." The Queen can't always hood the vicious passions that nip and strike from either side. And she does love your golden locks.

HAL. Blessed are the peacemakers.

EMILIA. Exactly.

HAL. (*smiles*). Will was right. He said your eyes were...

EMILIA. (*goes to pour him a drink*). Will. Will. Will. Do you never speak your own words?

HAL. On the contrary. It's my worst...

EMILIA. Now you're going to tell me your faults.

HAL. Shall I?

EMILIA. (*brings him the drink*). I'd rather hear what you like to ride. Or how it feels to plunge through the channel in winter, chasing adventure.

HAL. You keep track o me?

EMILIA. I'm not a hermit. When the court chatters I hear it. You're the focus of every female that isn't drowsy with age.

HAL. Does that impress you?

EMILIA. No. It usually means the object is simple.

HAL. No doubt. (*Beat.*) But my "adventures" interest you.

EMILIA. (*laughing*). Immensely. (*They are looking at each other.*) Tell me something. You're a magnificent swordsman; I've seen you. When you fight... are you afraid?

HAL. That's difficult to know... because fear doesn't always make you run away. I think sometimes it... makes you fight.

EMILIA. Hunsdon says that, too. (*EMILIA walks away.*) Whenever I see someone hurt, bleeding, I'm enraged – at the stupidity of battle, but... there's something else about it, too, and I'm very curious.

(*EMILIA looks at HAL suddenly.*)

Some men who were fencing let me try rapier and dagger once. They showed me what you do – simple strikes and defenses. (*Beat. Excited.*) And I loved it! I can't tell you how I loved it. (*Beat.*) Could I fence? Must you be very strong?

HAL. (*amused, intent*). Perhaps. But skill and speed are more important.

EMILIA. (*going on*). I felt no fear, no hesitation - only surging... pleasure. Every inch, every part of me seemed to gather, to tune itself... behind the desire to attack, to strike, to exult in combat. (*Flushed with her passion.*)

HAL. (*pause*). Perhaps I could teach you.

EMILIA. Would you?

HAL. Perhaps. *(Pause.)* The first thing is... *(Steps closer, looking at her.)*
 You must hold the eyes of your opponent, because... you can always see
 in them what he's going to do. Never break your gaze to watch his
 weapon... or yours. That's when you lose... your aim and your nerve.
 The next thing is... *(Takes her hand.)* ...to protect your knuckles.
(Kisses her knuckles.) Funny, Such a small thing... *(Kisses her*
knuckles again.)

EMILIA. Yes. *(EMILIA smiles, and kisses HAL full on the mouth).*
(Stop. HAL looks at EMILIA; then determined, takes her in his arms.
Their embrace continues; he hungrily, she guiding.)

EMILIA. Easily now
(DORA appears, sees them, starts to leave.)

DORA. 'Scuse me...

EMILIA. *(without breaking their embrace).* What?

DORA. Sorry, m'lady. There's a Master Shakespeare. Do you want to see
 him?

EMILIA. No. Of course not. Now go.

(DORA exits. HAL has barely noticed the interruption. Embrace continues,
Lights change.)

(Outside, WILL leans, waiting. An OLD MAN comes on with a cart and shovel,
singing a penny ballad to himself. He opens the trap, ladles out a pile of feces
into his cart.)

WILL. That's a light tune for such a heavy chore – shoveling the sewer.

OLD MAN. *(surprised someone is there).* Eh-h-h?
(Straightens, grunts at WILL)

And 'tis a bright mornin' t'be skulking in the shadow. What business
 have ye t'slander m'chore? 'Tis life itself as the maker gives it. *(Ladles*
more feces.)

WILL. Does your maker in his goodness also grant the stench?

OLD MAN. Goodness is as y'receive it. Life goes its ways. *(Holding out his*
shovel.) This be the steamin' dung-pile of a livin' man. *(Tosses it, gets*
another shovel full.) N' this per'aps, a lively widow. Both bursting with
 life and good spirit. *(Bounces the pile on his shovel.)*

WILL. If your work is so honorable, why must you do it in grey light, when no one is out?

OLD MAN. If you haven't the eyes a'death in yer head! It's dawn, man, not grey. A purveyor of life is me, so wi'the dawn come I.

WILL. You purvey these stinking piles of shit.

OLD MAN. I purvey this over-abundance a'the nourishment given t'man. He's taken it, y'see. Taken that he needs, 'n transformed the remains. Transformed it into somethin' as can be used again t'enrich the maker's life-givin' earth. (*Prepares to exit.*) From this very pile may come a tree... wi' grapes... or peaches.

WILL. Or a tender flower.

OLD MAN. It's a miracle. (*Leaving.*)

(Ominous sound, plague in the air. OLD MAN stops, listens, then exits.)

(HAL comes out onto the street, not expecting to be met. WILL steps out, stands.)

HAL (*sees WILL, stops at a distance*). Will. (*Beat.*) You still here?

WILL. Good morning.

HAL. (*gathering his cloak, begins moving off*). You shouldn't have waited.

WILL. (*not moving*). I didn't mind.

HAL. Come on. I've got good news. She said she would...

WILL. Come here.

HAL. (*moving back toward WILL*). What?

WILL. Come here and tell me.

(WILL looks at HAL in silence, then—)

You've had her.

HAL. Will...

WILL. Don't flap your sagging lip at me. You've had her.

HAL. How...

WILL. How did I know? How? Go back and try to find the face you had. Your dry pinched cheek has softened. Your eyes can't smother what you never knew before. She's sunk deep in, and there she smolders.

(WILL strides off. HAL stands taking in what's been said, then runs after WILL.)

(LINDY drags sleepily up from the trap, re-establishing the Tavern, while WILL and HAL make a circuit of the stage—)

HAL. Hit me. Do it. Stand and hit me.

WILL *(walking fast)*. I hit you... and we both feel better?

(Entering the tavern, WILL swats LINDY's behind as he moves past, then flings himself onto a bench.)

One!

(HAL also gestures for a drink, sits beside WILL. Silence. LINDY brings drinks. More silence.)

HAL. You might... say something. *(Pause.)* Yell. *(Pause.)* I don't know what... *(Long pause.)* I'm sorry.

WILL. No real beauty.

HAL. I arranged a meeting for you...

WILL. How generous.

HAL. ...about the music.

WILL. You're willing to share? I'm to take the left-overs of my betters?
Ooooh, most faithful son.

HAL. Will, I really don't know what happened.

WILL. You don't?

HAL. No. I don't. I had no intention, nothing in my mind, but to make her think of you...

WILL. That, and knowing that I wanted her.

HAL. She remembered you, and...

WILL. ...you were curious to know what moved me?

HAL. ...she was pleased at the idea of writing music...

WILL. ...and you thought you'd have a try.

HAL. No! She just... drew something out of me that I... didn't even know was there.

WILL. She grabbed you?

HAL. No. *(Pause.)* Will, I...

WILL. Every man should have such a friend. I sent her my golden eunuch, the heart-pang of a hundred hopeful maidens... and, at a touch, she's

turned him into a rutting stag. *(Beat.)* How does it feel to be a man, boy?

HAL. Will, don't. I...

WILL. Never mind. *(He drinks.)* A silken whore. That's what she is. Common as Finsbury Fields, filthy as Moor Ditch. And that's what ignited me, that... made me groan. Oh, I deserve it.

HAL. Will, I didn't mean...

WILL. *(puts an arm around HAL)*. You're not to blame. Why should she wait on a ragged player when she has a glistening young Lord in hand. She's a witch. And her talons sink deep.

HAL. I don't know why. She isn't a beauty...

WILL. *(pulling away)*. You dare!

HAL. There's just something... she knows.

WILL. You think I'm a fool? Would I distress myself for a face? Praise her to me now. Go ahead, Philistine!

(WILL exits angrily. HAL alone, begins to smile, then chuckle.)

HAL. *(calls)*. Lindy!

(LINDY has dozed off in a corner, sits up suddenly.)

LINDY. What! Oh, your worship – pardon my droopin' away like... *(Straggles up to him.)* You'll have...?

HAL. I'll have... *(Looking her up and down.)* Have you still got that Castilian Madeira in the cellar?

LINDY. Yes, yer lordship. They drink naught but ale as comes in here.

HAL. Well, I want a great-sized jug of it brought up and sent off - to Hunsdon House. This morning. *(Gives her money.)*

LINDY. *(blinking awake to get it straight)*. Yessir. To Hunsdon House. *(As LINDY moves to the trap, HAL swats her behind, roaring—)*

HAL. Wake up, Lindy love. Life is passing by!

(Exit. Swirl of HAL's giddy exit yields to mournful plague sounds, ominous.)
(WILL is waiting, agitated. EMILIA enters, formal, but smiling—)

EMILIA. Master Shakespeare.

WILL. Your servant, Madame.

EMILIA. It seems that you would have me yours.

WILL. A fancy of my Lord Southampton's. He hopes you'll write music for his...

EMILIA. He's never heard my music.

WILL. Your reputation goes ahead of you, my lady.

EMILIA. There's an edge on your tongue, I think?

WILL. It's for his mother's wedding. She wishes it were his. There's a great match planned for him. The lord high treasurer's granddaughter. But he defers.

EMILIA. So whose wedding is the music for? You're speaking gossip.

WILL. I think you should know what his prospects are.

EMILIA. And mine with him, you mean.

WILL. Since you'll be plain...

EMILIA. I am never otherwise. It saves time.

WILL. You're playing a wild game.

EMILIA. Is he your patron? Or are you his.

WILL. (*pause, staring at her*). You seduced him.

EMILIA. Aren't you grateful? You couldn't drag him to a woman. Could you?

WILL. He... seemed averse.

EMILIA. And may be again. Perhaps he's learned the trick of another famous virgin. Of letting them all hope by letting them all dangle. Women and men alike.

WILL. (*pause*). You found him green?

EMILIA. A boy.

WILL. But he came strong?

EMILIA. Oh, he's able. But vain. I think he'll sway to those that flatter.

WILL. There's much to flatter.

EMILIA. Of course.

WILL. And now you have him lusting.

EMILIA. You object?

WILL. He cannot marry you.

EMILIA. Have I asked him?

WILL. You have some scheme. Why else...

EMILIA. I've cocked him. His mother has only now to fix the aim.

WILL. (*shocked beat*). What are you after? Did it amuse you to corrupt him? Do you think you're safe – leaping from one great lord to another? What kind of degeneracy holds in Italy!

EMILIA. (*slow burn*). Degeneracy... is all your pale-faced smocks pretending they're oh-so-prim while kicking scores of bastards beneath the bed. Their thighs will itch and their bellies swell, but, oh my dear, the mess on the sheets must be someone else. That's degeneracy.

WILL. Whore.

EMILIA. Have you anything but sex to say to me?

WILL. Have you anything but sex to do?

EMILIA. Hypocrite! What brings you wagging in here? You think I don't smell you coming? Music? Hah! Music is for the splendid ones – those who laugh in the sun and say that life is light. That beauty is the same thing as a child's smile, as a woman's moan. You come to me for music? I know you all. I've learned my lessons well. You have no ears, no eyes, no taste, no life. A woman's talents all are one to you. One, only one. Her bed. You... cold, dry Englishman, come fuss to me about your golden boy. And all the while your own lust drips from you. Lecher.

WILL. Haughty words. But your actions betray you.

EMILIA. My actions? What do you know of what a woman does? I've seen your "women" on the stage, sir. Your ravenous Queen Margaret is a shrieking, brittle scarecrow without a drop of woman's blood. It's clear you've never known a real one.

WILL. (*angry, takes hold of her*). And you... court slut... are going to teach me?

EMILIA. I'd never so dirty my tongue.

WILL. Go ahead. You might find something that you need.

EMILIA. I need nothing from you.

WILL. What have you now? A wilting old man who shrinks away before you're ripe?

EMILIA. You know nothing.

WILL. You're plucking at boys, still limp and green.

EMILIA. Bloody-eyed bull!

WILL. You're so hot you'll scorch me,

EMILIA. Try it. I'll bite you off whole.

WILL. And spoil your chance for a blade as hot as your sheath? I'm no wilting old man, girl.

EMILIA. He's wilting, you think? His seed bursts in me.

WILL. *(stares, beat.)* I don't believe you.

EMILIA. I am with child!

(WILL lets go of EMILIA. Both are shocked by her revelation.)

WILL. Does he know?

EMILIA. He does. *(Beat.)* And he's gone.

WILL. My god. *(Silence.)* I'm sorry.

EMILIA. You didn't do it.

WILL. No. *(Pause.)* No... *(They look at each other.)* It wasn't me.

EMILIA. *(pause, then—)* It was wild of me... with Southampton. A wild chance. I shouldn't have...

WILL. Don't speak.

EMILIA. I thought if I could make him want me...

WILL. I know now. Don't speak. *(Pause.)* And Hunsdon?

EMILIA. He seemed to love me. He was always kind...

WILL. But you. Do you...

EMILIA. *(wry hint of smile).* Do you love your patron? You should know. Can you love... someone who keeps you?

WILL. Emilia, I...

EMILIA. Love... is something that only comes in dreams.

WILL. Look at me, Emilia.

(EMILIA looks at WILL. He begins moving slowly towards her. Then, in a rush, they are holding each other.)

(Darkness. Running and scream of PEOPLE chased by plague. GUARDS criss-cross the stage around the embracing WILL and EMILIA. Blackout.)

END ACT ONE

ACT TWO

(Muffled drum. Horn sounds as lights go to black. Piercing cry of pain from off as isolated light comes up on RICHARD sitting working with account books. He hasn't heard the cry, only goes on working, exhausted.)

(From off: shouts of "Hold him." "Take hold." "Fast... fast." blend into a chant that accelerates, then stops abruptly, and breaks into many screams, while a knot of screaming PEOPLE burst onstage and scatter in many directions.)

(With them comes LINDY, who falls, is trampled, howling, and darts to safety... by RICHARD's knee.)

LINDY. Aaaiiiieee!

RICHARD. *(doesn't look up, goes on working).* What did I tell you?

LINDY. *(swiftly).* Don't even open yer mouth. *(Beat.)* What y'told me was nothin'. Just like a wrung rooster.

RICHARD. You saw, then.

LINDY. Ever'thing. Right up close. I squeezed through.

RICHARD. Well, why did you...

LINDY. There's nothin' in it. When they pull the cart away n'the rope snaps tight, 'is eyes bulge out. That's all. But that's not why I...

RICHARD. And after?

LINDY. After, they cut him down, n'wake him up. He starts t'kickin' when his clothes are ripped off, so's they hold him down whiles they flash the knife – high around so's even them at the back can see how sharp it is. Then fast, y'have t'look fast... they take hold of his doodlies, his danglies, y'know, just hold 'em straight up, and flick – they're off.

RICHARD. You... watched?

LINDY. A' course. What'd I go for? But the best was spoiled.

RICHARD. Spoiled.

LINDY. Botched. *(Beat.)* Oh, the one wi'the knife was a glory t'see. Wasn't his fault. Soon's he held up the doodlies, and tossed 'em off to the fire, he quick zipped him open n'reached for the guts. It was hard t'see with the blood shootin' ever' place, but I could tell – his eyes were still open! They were that close t'makin' it all the way... when some bloody bastard puked.

RICHARD. Not you.

LINDY. (*glaring*). ‘Course not me. I pretended t’myslf it was a hog n’not a man. All I wanted was t’ssee him still alive t’look at his heart... t’ssee his own heart.

RICHARD. People always puke.

LINDY. This time... some fool said “plague.”

RICHARD. (*rising*). They thought he had the plague?

LINDY. He probably did.

RICHARD. That’s why you ran.

LINDY. Some were trampled dead.

RICHARD. (*pause*). Then we’re finished here.

LINDY. (*moving apprehensively away*). Don’t know why you’ve stayed till now. They shut y’down days ago. Ever’one else is long gone.

RICHARD. I’m stubborn, pet. Can’t lay down the mantle till these books come right. Then, where should I go? (*Picks up books.*) I’m a city lad.

(RICHARD and LINDY move off in opposite directions. Shriek, as lights go to black.)

(Water noise, fog horns. Lantern approaches the front edge of the stage. A WATERMAN with an oar and EMILIA and DORA with bundles and cases are moving on together, as though in a small boat.)

WATERMAN. You sure, m’lady?

EMILIA. Yes, this is good. Tie up here. Hand out the cases, Dora.

(DORA hands bundles, basket, cases onto the stage)

DORA. Are we already there? Do you see the coach?

WATERMAN. If y’ask me, I’d never take a chance here.

EMILIA. Thank you, I won’t ask you. Step out, Dora.

(DORA climbs out onto the stage.)

Here you are. (*EMILIA gives money to WATERMAN, and climbs out.*)

DORA. I can’t see the coach. I don’t think...

EMILIA. (*picks up bundles, starts off into the dark*). Come along, Dora.

WATERMAN. Wait! Don’t you need a light?

DORA. There’s no coach. This isn’t the temple, m’lady!

EMILIA. *(from dark, distance).* I'm not waiting, Dora. Come.

*(Screams, running of VICTIMS caught by GUARDS with forked sticks.
DORA picks up the cases, and trundles after EMILIA.)*

DORA. Wait, m'lady... Where are we?

(The WATERMAN has cast off, now moves away.)

(A WATCHMAN crosses the stage, calling—)

WATCH. Hold there, Waterman!

WATERMAN. Yessir, I'm easy.

WATCH. Who's that you left off at Puddle Dock?

WATERMAN. A lady and her woman, sir. Picked'em off of a fancy coach down this side the bridge. Thought they'd be makin' for the country, but...

WATCH. Sure they weren't already sick?

WATERMAN. I ain't lettin' no disease on board! I check 'em good.

(WATCH grunts, continues off. WATERMAN exits. Dogs bark, dim light, some howls, distant scream.)

(A ragged curtain of hanging costumes is pulled into place amid the dark and confusion. A lute hangs with the costumes.)

*(EMILIA enters a "door," puts bundles down, examines surroundings.
DORA enters, puffing, loaded down—)*

DORA. You've gone stark mad. What have y'done to us!

EMILIA. Quiet. Come in quickly and bolt the door.

DORA. Just what is it you're trying to...?

EMILIA. *(pulls DORA in, and bolts the door).* Not trying, Dora, doing, doing.

DORA. The count's a thousand. A thousand dead in one week! We got t'get away.

EMILIA. Come here. Help me. *(EMILIA opens the trap, throws out a fur rug, a pail, other necessities.)*

DORA. Where are we? *(Looking through the curtain of costumes)* What is this place. – a pile of theatre junk?

EMILIA. Never mind it now. Come here.

DORA. What about the coachman waiting for us? He'll...

EMILIA. The coachman's been well paid. He doesn't expect us.

DORA. Paid? For what?

EMILIA. For not expecting us. It's easy, Dora. As easy as spying, Dora.

DORA. We've got t'get out of here. We'll catch it. I can feel it coming!

(DORA makes a run for the door, to escape; EMILIA bars her way.)

EMILIA. Did you leave a trail?

DORA. What?

EMILIA. Did anyone see the way you came? You made enough noise.

DORA. How would I be thinkin' a'that. Jesus, Lord, with the shrieks and the stench...

(As EMILIA surveys the room, DORA goes on raving—)

DORA. A cart rammed me, and what's dangling under its cover – arms!

Human arms, all confused, still festering. Y'can be sure I made a noise.

EMILIA. *(assuring herself.)* It's all right here.

DORA. All right? It's a hole a'filth!

EMILIA. Three year's dust everywhere... *(Moves to pick up the lute.)* It's perfect.

DORA. Perfect? Dear god...

EMILIA. If no one's been here, there's no plague. *(EMILIA strums once across lute strings, and outside, many sounds echo.)*

DORA. No, no, nowhere's safe. We've got t'get out. *(DORA jumps, shrieking—)* That was a rat. *(Points.)* He ran right under there.

EMILIA. Stop bellowing and help me clean. *(EMILIA wets a rag from a bottle.)* Use the wormwood.

(EMILIA drops to her knees, begins wiping the floor.)

DORA. You're going to...

EMILIA. Of course. You can't do it all yourself.

(EMILIA hands DORA another rag. DORA falters between refusing to help, because she objects to staying, and absent-mindedly wiping, to calm her anxiety.)

DORA. We should be safe in the country. M'Lord Hunsdon expects...

EMILIA. My lord expects, my lord orders, my lord wills... My lord owns this place, too.

DORA. *(wailing).* You've murdered us.

EMILIA. I'm sorry for you Dora, but you've been my jailer, and now I'm yours.

DORA. We'll catch it and die here!

EMILIA. *(spreads out a fur rug for a bed)*. Not if you do as I say.

DORA. Y'can't clean it away. It comes on the putrid fog that rises outta Moor Ditch. It's seepin' in this minute. Can't y'smell it? I can smell it.
(Sudden long shriek outside. DORA jumps. Both pause, listening.)

EMILIA. *(softly)*. You can sleep down there. *(EMILIA nods at the trap door.)*

DORA. *(moving to the trap)*. Dear God, dear God... *(DORA peers into the trap.)* There's a altar down there. Is this a church?

EMILIA. Part of one. Was. Here, take this blanket.

DORA. Smells like a stall.

EMILIA. Stop whimpering.

DORA. Mother a'God, save us...

(DORA disappears below.)

EMILIA. Madonna Maria, save us sinners now.

(Sound and cries outside. A GUARD stalks with blue crosses - to mark houses with plague - and nails one at another place.)

(EMILIA, humming now, lights a candle. She "starts" at a noise. It is DORA climbing back up.)

EMILIA. Dora. What is it?

DORA. Can't sleep. Nothing for it. I'm dreamin' the infection is creepin' into me.

EMILIA. *(sighs)*. Then sit here until the dream has passed.

(DORA sits on the trap's edge. EMILIA comforts her. Pause. Knock from outside. DORA alarmed, disappears below. EMILIA gets up, snuffs the candle, goes to the door, calls softly—)

Yes?

(Muffled voice outside. EMILIA opens the door. WILL, standing there, pulls a scarf from his face.)

EMILIA. Dio mio... *(EMILIA embraces WILL.)* I was afraid you wouldn't... you couldn't...

WILL. Never fear that. *(WILL takes EMILIA's face in his hands.)* Thank god you're safe.

EMILIA. I was afraid you might not find...

WILL. I'd find you anywhere. (*Kisses her.*) Madame Composer, your text.
(*WILL hands EMILIA a packet.*)

EMILIA. You've begun? (*Opens the packet, reads.*) "Midsummer Night.
Now, fair Hippolyta. Our nuptial hour..."

(*Laughing, WILL rolls EMILIA onto the rug in his arms. Embracing, they don't see DORA creep up through the trap.*)

You rode all the way from Stratford?

WILL. Straight to you.

EMILIA. Past the watch at Newgate? How could you...

WILL. They don't worry who's trying to get in. It's going out they strip you.

DORA. (*from the trap.*) And if it's a red spot they find, ever so little...

(*WILL starts, looks at DORA, then back to EMILIA.*)

EMILIA. I'm sorry; I couldn't let her go without me. She'd have sent word
to Hunsdon, and then...

DORA. ...they shut y'up. You never come out again. Jesus, Jesus... (*Weeps.*)

WILL. It's all right here?

EMILIA. (*moves to a bundle.*) I've a gift for you. (*Brings him a small
package.*) Open it.

(*WILL opens the package. It is a leather and gilt-bound volume.*)

WILL. (*smiles.*) "Hero and Leander" It's beautiful. Thank you.

EMILIA. (*watching WILL closely.*) You don't know. Oh, god, you don't
know. Do you?

WILL. What is it? My love, it's wonderful. I have nothing of Marlowe's.
I'm very...

EMILIA. He's dead, Will. Marlowe died.

WILL. (*before he believes it—*) No. You don't... (*Beat.*) No!

EMILIA. Not plague. He was stabbed. They think... it was a fight.

WILL. (*lost, believing it.*) The fool. The damned, stupid fool.

EMILIA. I thought you knew. And I wanted you to have...

WILL. I know. Hush... (*WILL holds EMILIA, rocking, stricken.*) The great,
dear, terrible fool. What will we do? He knew the way, and he's left us
alone.

(*Dark. Night calls. A GUARD stalks. Another blue cross is nailed somewhere.*)

(Light is bright on the pages WILL is writing. EMILIA is next to him, reading his pages; the lute is beside her.)

EMILIA. *(laugh)*. Is it like this in your village? Do the workmen make plays?

WILL. Oh yes. For the squire. Sometimes the queen.

EMILIA. *(reading)*. The weaver... the tailor... the bellows-mender...

WILL. It's very serious.

EMILIA. *(takes up the lute, begins to "pick" notes)*. And you'll have them perform their play?

WILL. Yes. At Hippolyta's wedding feast. They'll come in front of the great people with all their props.

EMILIA. *(laughing)*. Like you. Then you'll want music for that.

WILL. Yes, but very simple. The kind of thing they'd do.

EMILIA. *(her cadences become more complex, like a madrigal)*. No, then not simple at all.

WILL. No?

EMILIA. *(playing with more and more spirit)*. I've never heard such singing as your guildsmen do. Their madrigals are infinitely complex. And beautiful, so beautiful.

WILL. Oho. My countrymen do excel at something?

EMILIA. Yes, they do. Don't tease me.

WILL. Only a little I'll tease you. *(Writing.)* We're a country nation, lass. Our ripest juice comes from the field.

EMILIA. Like you. *(Reaches a hand to caress him, goes back to reading.)* And the one who wants to be the lion? It's so funny and touching, and I...
(All at once WILL leans to kiss EMILIA; they get entangled. DORA emerges from below in a bright herald's cape and hat and heads for the door. EMILIA sees her before she can leave.)

EMILIA. Dora!

DORA. *(caught)*. Uuuh... I just wanted to ask... what's this one? *(Displays her costume.)*

EMILIA. A herald, Dora.

DORA. Ah. Herald, is it?

EMILIA. Yes, Dora. (*EMILIA waits while DORA descends, then—*) Still, if your play's set in Athens...

WILL. In Athens, I don't know what they did, but I know they loved theatre.

EMILIA. (*smiles*). I weep to think that through your words, everyone can feel... you so easily, so gently... paint it all. With my confusion of language I can only hobble.

WILL. Your language is music.

EMILIA. But I want...

WILL. And music needs no translation. If you make a melody that speaks, it will speak to everyone. It needs only one voice, in any tongue, to sing it. And if it's good... and true, it will live forever. You've made a gift... for the whole world.

EMILIA. (*kisses his hand*). I could die here happily.

WILL. Hush...

(*WILL and EMILIA embrace, roll onto the rug. Lights dim. Plague sounds. DORA emerges in a bear's head, goes to unbolt the door, exits. Dogs bark; musket shots.*)

EMILIA. (*starts*). What's that?

WILL. Today's quota, I suppose. The parrish pays a penny a head for every dog you kill.

EMILIA. Why?

WILL. Hundreds are roaming loose. Spreading plague, they think.

EMILIA. How awful to be a captive creature.

WILL. Yes, captive. (*Beat.*) I've been thinking... of what you said about patrons.

EMILIA. Patrons?

WILL. Yes. I've decided not to be 'kept' anymore.

EMILIA. You mean... by Hal?

WILL. And I think Richard may be right.

EMILIA. But you don't like being a player.

WILL. No. Not going in front of any mob that gathers. But something exciting did start to happen with "Henry Six." I think there may be... strength in my hand. (*Pause.*) If we can make the company work, if the

theatre's successful enough... perhaps I can get what I want by myself, without being a kept creature... forever licking someone not so good as me. You're weeping?

EMILIA. It's exciting to think... that you could be...

WILL. Free?

EMILIA. Yes.

WILL. And for you. If I'm not tied to Hal, to the court, who can complain? Who can disapprove? There'd be no ties to complicate... our being together. You'd be mine.

EMILIA. (*repeating*). I'd be yours. (*Beat.*) How could that be? I'm Hunsdon's.

WILL. Not now.

EMILIA. For the moment I've slipped the leash.

WILL. You said he doesn't care.

EMILIA. I think he'll be relieved.

WILL. So then you're free.

EMILIA. (*wary*). For you to keep me.

WILL. (*kissing and caressing her*). Hand and foot, throat and thigh, I'll keep you, I'll have you, I'll...

EMILIA. What if I say no?

WILL. (*stops abruptly, stung. Speaks low*). You witch. What do you want from me?

EMILIA. Don't be angry.

WILL. Angry... (*Furious.*) What about? That a heart is left naked on the table, moist and pulsing? (*Beat.*) What do you want!

EMILIA. I want truth, not...

WILL. And the truth is you're holding out for a lord!

EMILIA. (*ignoring his outburst*). You're saying that you love me, and...

WILL. You've stripped me and you know it. I'm helpless. I adore, I worship you.

EMILIA. And so you'll keep me?

WILL. And so you rule.

EMILIA. I rule?

WILL. Forever and ever.

EMILIA. Never. That power's a hoax.

WILL. Ruling me... a hoax?!

EMILIA. (*low, but excited*). I was better as a young fawn running in the field, flung beneath a tree, singing out loud the glory of my limbs. Then I was sovereign of me. My strength was infinite. But I have come into a new world now, where you are everything. I have drunk. I am intoxicate. The smell and taste of you have made me weak. But you still clutch me. I want to give myself, to yield again, again... but you still clutch me.

WILL. And you me. No shred of me is mine; I'm yours.

EMILIA. You aren't mine. That's a hoax.

WILL. (*hard*). You doubt me?

EMILIA. Not what you say. What you are.

WILL. I am what I say.

EMILIA. No. You are what you do. And what you do is play. And write. Your value in the world is clear. You can give yourself to me in words for always, and never lose today. You are what you do. What you do is your life. You can only celebrate with me.

WILL. (*pause*). I give myself in more than words.

EMILIA. And who am I? (*Beat.*) I want only to be yours, but once I am, I have nothing left to give. So you can't keep me.

WILL. Taking light from the candle leaves it with less?

EMILIA. If I can't stand apart... alone, collecting every cubit of air to the end of my reach, all the dirt my toes can stretch out to raise... and then turn to you, run to you laughing... it is not, it cannot be living love.

(*EMILIA and WILL stand apart, glaring at each other.*)

WILL. (*softly, but intending to chill*) If you caught the plague, I wonder if I'd put you in the street.

EMILIA. Don't.

WILL. I thought you wanted truth.

EMILIA. You're trying to hurt me.

WILL. I'm giving you truth: I saw a woman running down the street. Heard another screaming after her "She's left her child. Her child is crying for her, but it has the death." (*Beat.*) What is love, Emilia?

EMILIA. Fear... makes us all animals.

WILL. No one knows how he'll act until...

EMILIA. No. No one does.

(EMILIA turns away, but sees the door is unbolted, and runs to it—.)

Dora! *(Beat.)* She's gone.

(WILL races down the trap, shouts below—)

WILL. Dora!

(Pause. WILL comes up. Both frozen, stare at each other.)

EMILIA. What can we do?

WILL. I don't know. *(Pause)* We can't go after her.

EMILIA. No.

WILL. What do you think she'll...

EMILIA. I don't know. She may just run wild. She may go for help and...
turn us in.

WILL. Like a child. *(Pause.)* Try not to think of her. We'll just have to wait.
(They still are motionless, terrified. Pause.)

EMILIA. *(suddenly, in a rush).* We've asked for death by being here, and I've
never felt such life. To have less of it, less of you, now that I've known
what it is...

WILL. *(softly)* No need.

EMILIA. ...would be death for me.

WILL. Come. *(WILL hands EMILIA the lute.)* We'll pretend it's Doomsday.
And there's no need to struggle anymore. Only a need, before the last
bell, to finish the play.

EMILIA. *(laughing, crying).* Oh my love.

(They sit to write. Outside, a GUARD nails a blue cross nearby.)

You know... you said there'd be no ties to complicate...

WILL. That's right.

EMILIA. But your wife?

WILL. *(stops writing, dead look).* You can't forget. *(Beat.)* Try. Please.

(EMILIA looks at WILL)

It's dead. It's a bad joke from my childhood. So long ago the pain of it
no longer moves me.

EMILIA. Your children are not dead.

WILL. No. *(Looks at her.)*

EMILIA. And you will see to them.

WILL. Yes.

EMILIA. (*nods. Quietly*). How is that pain?

WILL. It's there. But only when I'm with them. A flood of tenderness. The knowledge of loss... loss of their growing days. When I leave, it's...
(*Beat.*) But when I'm here I never think of them.

EMILIA. Never?

WILL. (*pause*). Seldom.

EMILIA. And carefully.

WILL. Yes. I tiptoe past the memory.

(*Pause. Thump against the door. Both rise, bracing themselves. Outside, a cry.*)

EMILIA. What can we do?

WILL. Wait. (*Pause. Another thump, and a cry.*) It's not a watchman. Wait.
(*WILL goes to the door, pauses, opens carefully... A lump outside falls into the room.*)

EMILIA. It's Dora! Pull her in.

(*They drag in DORA, whimpering. WILL bolts the door.*)

EMILIA. (*hands on DORA, shakes her.*) Where have you been? What have you done to us? Who have you spoken to! (*EMILIA slaps DORA.*)

DORA. (*cringing.*) Don't m'lady. Take me in, take me in, please...

EMILIA. Answer me! (*Slaps DORA.*)

DORA. All right! Please don't hit me. Don't hit me... please.

EMILIA. Why did you leave? (*Beat.*) You were sending to Lord Hunsdon.

DORA. Yes, but I didn't. I promise on Sweet Jesus I didn't.

(*WILL moves in to comfort DORA.*)

DORA. I went to my friends... my niece, down half Water Lane. When I came near, when I came near... (*She weeps.*)

WILL. Quietly now. What happened?

DORA. (*deep breath, then speaking quietly, without emotion—*) I saw the watch. He placed the mark, the blue cross on the house, and he was nailin' fast the door. When I came close he said, "Stay away from there." I asked him, "Who's inside?" He said, "All. All dead." I wept out loud. Four babies, there are four little children; my niece, her man, and the old ones, too. Sweet Jesus, I wept out loud. But then I stopped: from inside, low and faint behind the door, came cries. I screamed at

the watch “They’re not all dead!” He grabbed my arm and dragged me down the street. “Get to your own house, woman. And pray for them.”

(DORA weeps. EMILIA holds DORA, her head on her lap. EMILIA rocks slightly, humming, then stops suddenly, looking at DORA’s neck.)

EMILIA. *(soft cry)*. Aaaaaaahh! *(looks to WILL)* She’s got it. Look...

(EMILIA points to a spot on DORA’s neck. WILL moves quickly to look, then lifts DORA’s arm, feels her armpit, and nods. DORA, sensing what they’ve seen, is moving away with guttural sounds, like a cornered animal.)

WILL. There’s a swelling.

DORA. No... let me be. It hasn’t got me.

(WILL and EMILIA look at each other; she horrified; he on guard).

WILL. What do you want to do?

EMILIA. *(near hysteria)*. I don’t know. I don’t know!

(EMILIA claps a hand on her mouth to keep from screaming, and sucks breath to calm herself.)

DORA. I’m going t’report this all t’good Queen Bess. T’nail folks up alive is not her way.

EMILIA. *(calmer)*. So now I learn... I’m not an animal.

(WILL holds EMILIA.)

EMILIA. I brought her here. I’m sorry, love. You go now. Go quickly!

WILL. *(grunts with a half-smile)*. You’ll put me in the street?

EMILIA. You’re well, and if you stay... *(WILL’s look has stopped her.)*

WILL. Take her in. Make her sleep. I’ll be here.

DORA. *(huddled in corner)*. ...hasn’t got me, hasn’t got me.

EMILIA. *(goes to DORA, gets her to her feet)*. Come dear. My poor fool.

Come. You’re all right. Don’t worry, dear one... come rest.

(EMILIA and DORA exit down the trap. WILL sits motionless, then he begins to write.)

(Finally, EMILIA comes up quietly, sits beside WILL, lays her head down on the table. He strokes her hair.)

WILL. It’s a dream turned nightmare, isn’t it? *(Pause. Then lightly.)* I’ve had an idea. See what you think: That the play is a dream. And in that dream live fairies. Now... there’s something you need to know about England. In our woods there are many spirits. And above them all, a

King and Queen. They are magnificent and proud. He is all man, and she all woman. And when they are in love, the forest sings, the fields are bountiful, even the world of humans is at peace. But when they disagree... foul vapors rise and choke the health of every creature.

EMILIA. (*lifting her head*). Then why should it be...

WILL. Should what be.

EMILIA. ...when we're so far in love... that the world is...

WILL. You forget. What I'm telling you is only a dream.

(*EMILIA smiles, lays down her head. Pause. Then she suddenly raises it, with a surprised cry—*)

EMILIA. Ooooooh!

WILL. What is it. You heard something?

EMILIA. No, felt.

WILL. Felt?

EMILIA. (*holds her stomach*). Here.

WILL. (*puts his hand on her stomach. Pause, then—*) It's quick!

EMILIA. (*laughs, gasps*). It feels... like someone's there. (*Laughing.*) It's knocking. It wants to come out. Look at it! Look at that lump. It's a foot... or a fist. (*To her stomach.*) Just wait, now, just a bit. The rusty world needs a small bit of time, just to... freshen itself, to be brighter for you... oh, my child.

(*They both laugh. WILL follows the moving lump of kicks with his hand on EMILIA's stomach, then—*)

EMILIA. Come, I feel like life now. While I've got the courage I'm going to... (*EMILIA goes to a case, gets out some papers.*)

WILL. What?

EMILIA. Here. Read. (*Beat.*) Quickly, or I'll take them back.

WILL. (*takes the papers*) What... (*Looks at them.*) Poems. You wrote them? Why didn't you tell me?

EMILIA. Quick. Read, before I hide them again.

(*WILL reads, eagerly intent. EMILIA tries to be busy about the room, but steals looks back. Finally he stops reading, may rest his head on his hand.*)

EMILIA. Yes? (*Pause.*) You've finished?

WILL. (*simply, quietly*) You... are my soul. How did you learn? How could there be... a woman?

EMILIA. You like it? It's all right? My writing?

WILL. All right? Yes, it's all right. Come here, you witch.

(*Weeping, laughing, WILL reaches for EMILIA. She comes to him slowly, shyly, beginning to laugh herself.*)

WILL. My wanton witch. My other self, my only... Emilia.

(*Dark. Night sounds. GUARDS cross, nail a blue cross. WILL and EMILIA are sleeping. Scream from below, and both start awake. WILL sits up.*)

WILL. What is it?

EMILIA. Dora. Dear god...

(*Crashing below. DORA appears through the trap, her face red, wild.*)

DORA. Have t'get out. Getting out!

(*DORA thrusts herself up into the room, almost falls; EMILIA catches her—*)

EMILIA. Dora, sit down. You're very weak. Sit down.

DORA. Have t'go. Have t'get out.

EMILIA. She's burning.

WILL. Come, Dora. Let's see how you are.

DORA. Need the river. Need t'bathe.

EMILIA. Will, look at the swellings. They're...

WILL. They've started to open. I'd hoped...

EMILIA. I'm going to get some wormwood. (*EMILIA moves to get a bowl and cloth.*)

WILL. Emilia, no.

EMILIA. I've got to do something.

DORA. Goin' now. (*DORA rises. WILL takes hold of her.*)

WILL. We're taking you back to bed, Dora.

DORA. (*shouts*). I'm burning. There's fire on me!

EMILIA. Will...

WILL. Get away! Emilia, I've seen corpses with dead birds hanging from these sores, put there to suck the poison. Get away.

(EMILIA is getting faint.)

DORA. I don't want the fire. Take it away from me. Stop. No!

EMILIA. Will, I've got to... I... *(EMILIA starts to vomit, grabs a cloth.)*

WILL. There's nothing to do, Emilia. Nothing anyone knows that will help.

(WILL starts to move DORA back down the ladder)

DORA. Stop. Stop'em. There's devils jumping at me.

(Sudden banging on the door)

EMILIA. *(towel at her mouth).* Will!

(WILL covers DORA's mouth and drags her down, shutting the trap after them. More banging.)

VOICE. *(off).* Open up in there.

(EMILIA goes to the door, unbolts it, opens a crack. An OLD WOMAN peers in. She is a sight: dirty, smelly, layered with rags.)

OLD WOMAN. Any sick in here?

EMILIA. No. No one.

OLD WOMAN. *(pushing in).* Ahhh, who's all livin' here then?

EMILIA. Me.

OLD WOMAN. Just you?

EMILIA. And... my husband.

OLD WOMAN. Oh, I see, I see... *(Nodding, peering about room.)* Well, won't y'let an old woman set a spell? Been out workin' all night.

EMILIA. *(beat).* Of course. *(EMILIA indicates a bench.)*

OLD WOMAN. *(goes to sit).* Can't say as I remember any folks livin' here a'fore... this bein' old St. Anne's 'n all.

EMILIA. The owner's asked us to look after... the properties.

(EMILIA gestures toward the costumes.)

OLD WOMAN. *(nodding, but not listening).* Aye, aye. Time was, they kept horses here. In the very chapel, it was. *(Chuckles.)* Laugh on the stinkin' papists, that. *(Stops.)* Thought I oughta have a look in. Sure I heard some noise. *(Fastens on EMILIA.)* Y'know y'don't look a bit rosy, my dear. Sure you're not feelin'...

(WILL is coming up through the trap into the room)

WILL. She's fine.

OLD WOMAN. Now, don'tcha be gettin' all nervy. I'm not one as nails ya in.
I'm one as helps ya. I'm assigned nurse by the magistrate.

WILL. Nurse?

OLD WOMAN. 'At's right, at's right. Just lemme show y'my ord'nance
here...

*(OLD WOMAN gets out a filthy, greasy, folded paper, and hands it
to WILL.)*

EMILIA. She's a nurse?

WILL. So it says.

OLD WOMAN. I look after them as can't come out.

WILL. You mean in the marked houses.

OLD WOMAN. 'At's right, at's right.

WILL. *(giving her paper back to her).* And you're paid by the head.

OLD WOMAN. Long as they live, sir. Y'know I don't like the looks a'yer
wife, sir.

WILL. Look carefully, woman. My wife is with child.

OLD WOMAN. *(looking at EMILIA).* Awhhh, that's it, is it? Ah, well, ya got
t'excuse a woman doin' her job, haven't ya? You'd be s'prised how
they set about t'fool me. Stuff their sick anyplace there's a hole. Throw
'em out to the gutter... throw 'em dead on somebody's else's stoop.
And all so's to hinder the rightful law in markin' out the sick houses.

WILL. It's a terrible thing.

*(Pause, while the OLD WOMAN keeps nodding and looking
around the room and at the trap door.)*

If you're ah, rested now, and ready to be on your way... we'd like to
contribute a bit... to your good work.

(WILL hands the OLD WOMAN money.)

OLD WOMAN. Now that's right Christian a'you, my good man. Right
Christian, 'Course I have t'move along. 'Course a'do.

WILL. *(taking her to the door).* Thank you. For your interest.

OLD WOMAN. Not a'tall. S'my job, m'good man, s'my job.

WILL. Goodbye.

OLD WOMAN. Ahahahah... just a point more, now.

WILL. Yes?

OLD WOMAN. If that sick'un downstairs comes through the night, she'll come through the year...

(OLD WOMAN chortles, then goes. EMILIA looks at WILL wearily.)

EMILIA. Was that the angel of death, do you think?

WILL. No... I'd rather think it was Puck.

EMILIA. Puck?

WILL. I'll tell you, after a while.

(WILL goes down the trap. EMILIA sits breathing deep, motionless, until he returns—)

WILL. *(quietly).* How are you?

EMILIA. I'm here. *(Beat.)* Dora?

WILL. Sleeping now. She's cooler.

EMILIA. *(quietly).* My mother used to tell about when she was a girl, when the plague had passed, in Venice. *(Pause.)* Half the grand mansions all along the canal stood quiet, and empty... just waiting in silence... to be taken. By anyone. Anyone still alive. I try to imagine that – the joy of some poor man who finds himself a glittering mansion. All the gold, marble, tinted glass. *(Pause.)* But all that comes, all that comes when I shut my eyes... is the water. The bright, delicate water. Oh, Will, if I could tell you, if you could see the color of it, just once. So purely... turquoise, so clear. *(Silence. Simply.)* I want you to know that I'm not sorry for anything... for myself. If I die, I'll be happy. Because I found you. And if that could happen, then everything else must be right as well. But if you...

WILL. Don't speak.

EMILIA. If you...

WILL. Emilia, we'll both live. Come, rest.

(Dark. Maybe humming – soft song in the darkness. Fade to day, street noise sounds like life has returned. PEOPLE cross the stage with different loads, etc.)

(WILL walks on with parcels and a bucket of water, his hat pulled low. He sees something ahead that makes him turn abruptly and walk the other way. From offstage we hear RICHARD—)

RICHARD. *(off).* Will!

(WILL continues walking away. RICHARD runs onstage.)

RICHARD. Will Shakespeare. Wait!

WILL. (*stops, turns*). Gallant Richard. How are you?

RICHARD. How are you? Where have you been?

WILL. I went off to Stratford; you knew that.

RICHARD. You weren't there long. I've a letter from your wife.

WILL. Good. I'll come by to get it. Have you heard anything from the Admiral's Men?

RICHARD. Still out in the country. They've managed to keep touring. But Pembroke's troupe came back two weeks ago. With nothing. Bankrupt. They pawned their costumes.

WILL. Horrible.

RICHARD. Robert Browne's gone to play in Denmark. But his wife and children... The house is boarded up, Will. And he doesn't know. They're all dead.

WILL. No. Oh god, no.

RICHARD. Mercy on us all. (*Pause.*) Have you been writing?

WILL. Wonderfully. You'll be pleased.

RICHARD. Where are you staying?

WILL. My old place. (*Beat.*) I've changed your part.

RICHARD. (*not buying it.*) I went to your old place, Will.

WILL. Theseus isn't for you; I've...

RICHARD. Not Theseus?

WILL. No, much better. I'll play Theseus. I've written you a glorious part. I'll bring it 'round.

RICHARD. Maybe Hal was right.

WILL. You've seen him?

RICHARD. He thought you might be hiding.

WILL. Hiding? What for?

RICHARD. He was right, wasn't he?

WILL. That's ridiculous.

RICHARD. You're with that woman, aren't you? (*WILL doesn't reply.*) Lord Hunsdon's back in the city, Will. Does he know?

WILL. (*leaving*). I'm almost finished. I'll bring the part round to the theatre tomorrow.

RICHARD. Will, wait...

WILL. It's Oberon.

(WILL is gone. RICHARD calls after him—)

RICHARD. For god's sake, Will, get out of it. Will!

(Lights shift to DORA sitting up, eating. EMILIA sits with her.)

DORA. *(between mouthfuls).* B'cause they drain ya. They curl their tiny tongues around the nib n'pull. They can pull somethin' terrible. And the milk comes squirtin' into their greedy gullets, and it's bound t'come from somewheres, and that somewheres is you! So ya got t'rest up a lot, like a cow down the meadow. And take lotsa ale, n'such.

(Knock outside. EMILIA gets up, speaks carefully at the door.)

EMILIA. Yes?

WILL. *(off).* It's me.

(EMILIA unbolts the door. WILL enters with parcels and bucket.)

WILL. Fresh water. Here we are.

EMILIA. Did you have to go far?

WILL. No. The conduit's running clear. Sewage is unbearable, though. Spilling over the gutter. How is she? Up earlier than yesterday.

EMILIA. Eating like a horse. Next week she'll be stronger than both of us.

DORA. Sweet Jesus saved me. Spite a'my sins.

EMILIA. She's been preaching at me for a good hour – how the black sins of London bring down the plague.

DORA. That they do, that they do.

WILL. *(moves about restlessly).* No doubt she's right. No one sees so clear as one who's been spared.

EMILIA. What's wrong, Will?

WILL. *(looks at her. Pause.)* Have you more writing to show me?

EMILIA. I rewrote the last quatrain; I'll show you... *(Beat.)* What is it?

(EMILIA moves to WILL.)

WILL. Nothing. Let me see it.

EMILIA. Did someone see you?

WILL. (*holds her close*). I think we'll put your first twenty poems together and show them to my printer. They're ready now. They should be published.

EMILIA. I'm glad you think so. (*Pause.*) Please tell me. Something's happened.

WILL. (*still holds her, so she can't see his face*). I saw Richard. He... told me Lord Hunsdon's back.

EMILIA. (*pause*). And that's all? Richard didn't know that we're...

WILL. That's all.

EMILIA. (*pause*). Hunsdon will expect me. Make up my things, Dora, now.

WILL. No!

EMILIA. We mustn't be foolish. If life is beginning again, we can't stay hidden.

WILL. Life begins. So life must end?

EMILIA. No, not end. Not ever. Change, perhaps.

(EMILIA is hurriedly putting her things together.)

I don't know. I can't think clearly. I only know if I don't leave now, I'll never have the strength, and we'll be discovered like rats, without any place to fight from. Quickly, Dora. We must seem to have come from the country.

WILL. Let's leave together. We can go to Italy.

EMILIA. Oh, my dreamer, don't make me weak.

(EMILIA holds WILL)

Don't be a child.

(EMILIA gathers her cloak.)

Come, Dora, quickly, or never. Or never...

(Hesitates at the door.)

I'll talk to him simply. He doesn't want me now. (*Laughs.*) You see? I knew the child in my belly was a blessing. This bastard-child will set me free. I'll send to you tonight. Oh my sweet love.

(EMILIA runs to WILL. They hold each other.)

WILL. You're weeping.

EMILIA. I'm not weeping. I'm very brave. A grand actress Italienne. You'll see. I won't disgrace your art. I'll play my part very very well.

(Going.) And while I'm gone you must finish the last scene.

(EMILIA is at the door.)

The fairy kingdom goes to bed, each bed right at last, at peace, happily.

(On her way out—)

The wedding dance is on the top, there. See if you think it will do.

(WILL is alone. Pause.)

WILL. It will do.

(Burst of lively noise. SERVANTS move on and off, preparing a festival, sweeping away all traces of WILL and EMILIA's hide-out "room".)

(DORA enters Hunsdon House, trying not to be terrified. HUNSDON hustles in, opposite her.)

HUNSDON. Dora. come in! Now, how do y'be?

DORA. Well, m'lord. *(Beat.)* Glad t'see you, I'm sure.

HUNSDON. And your mistress? I wonder we've na'seen y'sooner. *(Pause.)*
How comes the child?

DORA. Oh rightly, my lord, rightly. Kickin' along.

HUNSDON. Perhaps a fine boy?

DORA. No doubt, my lord. It's ridin' high.

HUNSDON. *(pause).* The country served you well?

DORA. *(uneasy).* Yes sir. I, ah, caught a bit.

HUNSDON. What's that?

DORA. I had a touch, my lord. A'the death.

HUNSDON. Good lord!

DORA. But it's all gone now. My lady...

HUNSDON. Yes.

DORA. She nursed me, my lord. Most kind she was.

HUNSDON. I see.

(EMILIA enters, curtsies at distance from HUNSDON.)

Time makes you ever more beautiful, my dear.

EMILIA. I beg your forgiveness.

HUNSDON. How?

EMILIA. I behaved unwisely and peevishly about the pregnancy. I'm greatly sorry for it. You, of course, knew best. I was blind and selfish. I come now to assure you that I will never trouble you... and Lady Hunsdon. I will leave... and I will live quietly. You'll see. You'll never have cause to regret anyth...

HUNSDON. You cut me.

EMILIA. No, I don't wish to...

HUNSDON. Yes. And deserve it I do, that's sure. I was shocked and... and behaved rashly. But I'll repair it. Everything. You'll see. And you'll come t'think kindly of me again.

EMILIA. But I don't think badly...

HUNSDON. I am even willin', my darling, I am even willin', for your own sake, t'give you up.

EMILIA. (*beat*). I see.

HUNSDON. I am willing t'think of you, henceforward, only as my dearest a'daughters.

EMILIA. I'm... grateful.

HUNSDON. I intend t'make you a whole woman... by the gift of a husband.

EMILIA. (*pause*). A husband?

HUNSDON. And t'settle my dowry upon you, a grand dowry, darlin', of...

EMILIA. No. (*Beginning to be frantic.*) No! No husband. I don't want a husband.

HUNSDON. My darlin', it's settled. I've spent long hours upon it. And I'm content.

EMILIA. (*trying to be calm*). No. Please. Please understand me...

HUNSDON. Alfonso Lanier is the perfect match for you.

EMILIA. Please listen.

HUNSDON. He has a talent like yours, a family as renowned for their music...

EMILIA. Oh, god, you must see. Please. I want only quiet. No marriage. No dowry. Give me nothing. Only, please... let me be alone. To myself, for myself.

HUNSDON. And have the child of Lord Hunsdon born a bastard?

EMILIA. (*pause*). So. It's not me at all. It's the child. If it was only me, you would let me go.

HUNSDON. You and the child are bound. You are known my mistress,
Madame. You have been well advertised.

EMILIA. No, please.

HUNSDON. You are wrong to accuse me. I am here to give grace. And I
care for you deeply.

EMILIA. Then you must understand...

HUNSDON. That you must have a good husband...

EMILIA. No!

HUNSDON. ...for the love of all three of us.

EMILIA. I won't.

HUNSDON. My darlin' you must understand that your life has changed...

EMILIA. I asked for no change.

HUNSDON. ...and that what one sows...

EMILIA. Sows! Who sows? Who?

HUNSDON. Y'didn't mind the sowing. You courted it.

EMILIA. As was my place!

HUNSDON. Your place pleased you. You had the advantage of it.

EMILIA. And when it comes to reaping, it is my life that must change?

HUNSDON. Don't sting me, girl. Do y'forget that I must lose you?

EMILIA. Lose me? No. You secure me, bind me, forever. My life is no
more. It is finished.

HUNSDON. You are selfish, m'dear.

EMILIA. *(pause. She stands panting, glaring at him.)* I won't marry. I won't
let you imprison me. *(EMILIA starts to leave.)*

HUNSDON. Did you think I'd let you live whore to a player?

(EMILIA stops, but doesn't turn back)

I thought we might be spared the... unpleasantness. *(Pause)* I thought
he might have been... not important. But since I see he is, I'm sure
you're going t'be wise.

EMILIA. *(turns slowly).* How... do you know?

HUNSDON. Does it matter?

EMILIA. *(drained).* No.

HUNSDON. I am an old man. And foolish, a'course. But not unkind.
Whatever you're thinking t'day. And I will not coerce you.

EMILIA. (*hoarse, barely audible*). I love him. (*Pause.*) Please.

HUNSDON. So I see. Yes. He is remarkable. (*Pause.*) You'll excuse me.
There's an interview I must...

(*Stunned, EMILIA turns to go.*)

No. Stay, please. It won't take long.

(*RICHARD enters*)

HUNSDON. Come right in, sir. I'm pleased t'see you.

RICHARD. It's kind of you, my lord. I didn't expect...

(*Surprised to see EMILIA, he bows.*)

My lady.

EMILIA. (*gathering herself*). How pleasant to see you again, Master Burbage.

HUNSDON. Oh, yes, we've all met before, have we not? (*Pause.*) Well now, young man. I've called you here especially... because I have news that I think will be pleasin' to you.

RICHARD. My Lord?

HUNSDON. I've considered carefully your proposal, your prospects, the present reputation... of your company. I find them glowing, sir, all three.

RICHARD. I'm very glad.

HUNSDON. But I also see that what you need... is someone powerful. And, I won't mince words: someone with money, sir, and plenty of it.

RICHARD. I can't say you aren't plain, my lord.

HUNSDON. Exactly so, sir, and I want t'tell you plainly, sir, that I'm your man.

RICHARD. (*stunned, joyous*). My lord, I'm... Thank you! You won't be sorry. I... It means so much. We'll be able now to...

HUNSDON. Just so. A'course.

RICHARD. Tomorrow. Tomorrow, if you've the time, my lord, I'll take you 'round the theatre. You can see the workings from the inside, meet the members of the company, those who're back in the city.

HUNSDON. That would please me.

RICHARD. Then perhaps you'll help us with an application for reopening, my lord? With your name on it...

HUNSDON. For certain. We can't have my company out of work.

RICHARD. Have you thought... of how you'd like us named?

HUNSDON. Now, that I haven't. Emilia, darlin', give us a help here. The company a'players. What would be the proper name, do you think?

EMILIA. I... suppose they should be called "The Lord Chamberlain's Men."

HUNSDON. The Lord Chamberlain's Men. You like it, Master Burbage?

RICHARD. I like it very much!

HUNSDON. Then, shall we retire t'christen the notion?

RICHARD. By all means, my lord.

EMILIA. Master Burbage. Congratulations.

RICHARD. Perhaps I have you to thank, my lady.

EMILIA. Perhaps you will.

(HUNSDON ushers RICHARD upstage and out, then looks back—)

HUNSDON. I thought you'd want to hear that, darlin'. This is his enterprise as well, y'know. *(Pause.)* Can my mistress be his whore, and bear my bastard in his attic? *(Pause.)* If you go to him, I'll have t'drop him. And his fellows.

(Pause. HUNSDON begins to leave, then hesitates—)

You did choose well, m'dear. If it were another man, I mighta been jealous, and... to ruin him would be a small thing. But this one...

(HUNSDON exits. EMILIA is alone. DORA enters.)

DORA. M'lady?

EMILIA. *(faintly, without looking at her).* Yes, Dora.

DORA. Is all well?

EMILIA. What would you call well, Dora? *(Grabs DORA.)* Are you true?

DORA. As you were t'me, m'lady.

EMILIA. Then be silent.

(HAL sits drinking in the Tavern. WILL suddenly enters, disheveled, packet in hand. HAL surprised. WILL, caught off guard, too, bluffs—.)

WILL. Your Lordship. *(Beat.)* There's no one home over at the theatre. I, ah, didn't expect...

HAL. Look there. It's the prodigal father.

WILL. Who has squandered his annuity.

HAL. You might have had a lodging. We expected you at Titchfield.

WILL. Cool and elegant retreat. I missed velvet walks, rustling hallways...

HAL. Where've you been?

WILL. ...polite speculations on our friend Marlowe - hit by a knife?

HAL. (*looks at WILL sharply, speaks quietly*). Don't, Will.

WILL. Is any more known?

HAL. No. I don't believe it was a simple fight. But why or how exactly... He was reckless. The times are dangerous.

WILL. Which times are not?

HAL. And for a poet to be reckless...

WILL. It's easy to be hit by a knife? I'm not political.

HAL. (*smiles*). No. No. (*Pause.*) Richard said he caught you...

WILL. (*interrupts.*) Where is Richard?

HAL. ...creeping about. Plague-proof, are you?

WILL. As priest in closet. Cheer up, son. You have first honors. (*WILL flops his packet down.*) Didn't Richard tell you?

HAL. (*scoops up the packet*). My play? You finished it! (*HAL opens it, leafs through.*) Complete with music? (*Looks at WILL inquiringly.*)

WILL. Of course.

HAL. You weren't too... busy?

WILL. Too busy to work?

(*Suddenly DORA huffs in, out of breath.*)

DORA. M'lord! Oh, sweet Jesus be thanked, you're here.

WILL. (*startled*). Dora!

DORA. (*seeing HAL, curtsies*). M'lords, both.

(*WILL moves to DORA swiftly, and brings her downstage while HAL eagerly reads "his" play.*)

HAL. (*to himself*). "Four happy days bring in another moon..."

WILL. Thank god, Dora. How is she? Did it go well?

DORA. Praise god I'm alive is right. It's a long way!

WILL. Did it go well?

DORA. She said well. Very well. (*Huffing.*) Just let me sit a smidgen.

WILL. What happened? Lord Hunsdon was there?

?DORA. That he was, that he was. All chipper n'smiles t'see us, he was.

WILL. What did he say?

DORA. He's a good man, he is.

WILL. Dora!

DORA. Yes, what, sir?

WILL. What did he say? Did he know anything about... where she'd been?

DORA. Not a bit. Not a bit of it. N' he was so kind.

WILL. And Emilia. What did she say?

DORA. Just let me catch a breath. What was it she...?

WILL. Speak woman, or I'll give you a whack!

DORA. Lotta good'll come of that.

WILL. Speak.

DORA. Have to think first... Yes: you're to come to her.

WILL. Come! Where. How. When?!

DORA. Quiet now, just quiet, n'I'll tell you: You're to come to m'lord
Hunsdon's.

WILL. What?

DORA. Never y'mind. You're to come proper invited, with Master Burbage.
There's grand doin's tonight, count a'the plague, and all.

WILL. A dance!

DORA. Just what's wanted, just the thing. So's the two a'you can get lost,
easy enough.

WILL. *(hugs her, lifting her to her feet).* Dora! Dumpling darling Dora.

DORA. *(groaning, on her feet).* Now I must get back. And quick, she says.
And me barely breathing of the plague.

WILL. And she's all right? You're sure?

DORA. *(moving off).* I told you. Very well.

(Music. Dancing as in the opening scene, except there is a FIGURE OF DEATH whom DANCERS surround and defeat. Cheers, as the FIGURE OF DEATH is lifted, carried about. EMILIA comes from the dance, out of breath, to the virginal. DORA joins her. Dance music fades under.)

EMILIA. Quick, unlace me a little. (*DORA loosens the “board” front that is binding EMILIA.*) Oh my god.

DORA. It’s a bleedin’ crime to wear this now. Crime against the poor little head a’the child.

EMILIA. You’re sure he’s coming?

DORA. ‘Course I’m sure.

EMILIA. How did he look?

DORA. M’lady, I told you s’many times.

EMILIA. And did he smile at you with just this corner of his mouth, do you remember?

DORA. He was more with whackin’ and with huggin’ me than with smilin’.

EMILIA. With his eye fierce, and then warm, so warm... and deep, as if inviting the whole world to rest there. (*Rapt – absorbed in her vision.*)

DORA. (*uncertain what to say*). He’ll be glad to be seein’ you m’lady.

EMILIA. (*faintly*). Yes. (*Silence.*) Oh, Dora.

DORA. My lady?

EMILIA. I hear him. Go now. (*Turns to be fastened again.*)

DORA. (*fastening her*) Hear what? How could you hear?

EMILIA. Oh yes. Soft - but swift and strong. Sure as a deer in his forest, he’s coming. I’ll meet him. Go.

DORA. I go. I go. (*Leaving.*)

EMILIA. You remember the signal?

DORA. Yes, but I don’t know...

EMILIA. When I begin to play – then I’m ready.

(*Music resumes. DANCERS reform their pattern.*)

DORA. Yes. M’lady, it’s so...

EMILIA. What?

DORA. Exciting. Like... in the theatre!

EMILIA. Yes. But far more serious. I’ll need you. Don’t forget.

DORA. No. (*Leaving.*) I’ll be there. (*Reminding herself.*) When you play.

(*EMILIA joins the dance pattern, is whirled to its Center. ALL stop.*)

(*WILL enters, stands aside. A whirl of DANCERS begins around EMILIA.*)

(WILL falls into the outside of the circle; the music is fast while he swings EACH WOMAN and moves on, until—)

(WILL and EMILIA meet – and stand facing each other.)

WILL. Your feet barely kiss the ground. I believe you're a sprite.

EMILIA. What if I am?

WILL. I'll snare you.

EMILIA. Till morning light.

(They spin, facing each other, out of the dance, and embrace, while OTHERS spin away.)

WILL. My darling, my darling. *(They kiss long, but then—.)*

EMILIA. *(Stepping backwards away.)* Good. Now... say goodbye.

WILL. *(Holds her at arms length.)* Emilia...?

EMILIA. Let go of me. Do as I say. I've sent for you as I promised. It's best to be clean.

(WILL still holds onto EMILIA, staring at her.)

Let go of me.

WILL. Stop it, Emilia. *(Pause. Shakes her.)* Emilia! Stop it!

EMILIA. *(Breaking free.)* Come. You're a grown-up man. Now be still and listen. It was a good time, a wonderful time. And I needed it. But life changes.

WILL. Emilia...

EMILIA. You know that. The plague has passed...

WILL. What has happened? Speak like yourself.

EMILIA. Things were bad for me. My luck had to improve, and now... something wonderful has happened.

WILL. You're playing a part. Damn you!

EMILIA. You won't grudge my luck will you? Not if you care for me.

WILL. You think I'm a fool? It's a wretched performance.

EMILIA. What did life offer me. What did you offer? A player's wage? Whore to a player who'd already five mouths to feed? Don't be a dreamer.

(Struck too deep, WILL slaps EMILIA. She staggers, glad that he believes her now. Pause; both hold back sobs—)

WILL. I don't believe you.

EMILIA. Then why hit me? Like your whore.

WILL. *(breathing heavily)* He knows. He knows about us... and he's threatened you.

EMILIA. No. He doesn't know. And if he finds out... I'll ruin you.

WILL. Be quiet! You're lying. I can't listen.

(EMILIA sits at the virginal, begins playing, and looks upstage for DORA to come. WILL leans against the virginal, his head hung a moment, then suddenly he seems to recover, speaks brightly—)

You're right of course. There's no need to prolong... sweet agonies. My luck is better, too. The great Lord Hunsdon has smiled upon us - my company.

(WILL looks at EMILIA to see how she reacts. EMILIA hesitates only a beat, then plays on.)

That's it, isn't it? You know about that. And you've decided. For yourself. My future must be secured.

(Beat. Then EMILIA plays more intensely.)

You can't decide alone, Emilia. I'm a grown-up man. Allow me that dignity.

(EMILIA's playing falters, stops. She looks at WILL.)

Now tell me: it's my new connection, isn't it? The Lord Chamberlain – his men.

(EMILIA looks away. WILL puts his hand on her shoulder. She resumes playing.)

And it would be a bit... messy... for us to go on coupling.

EMILIA. *(Looks at him as she plays.)* Of course.

WILL. What's done can be forgotten.

EMILIA. You see.

WILL. A sordid episode. With my future so bright and all. *(Pause.)* Yes?

(EMILIA doesn't answer, but continues playing. He grabs her by shoulders, sitting on the keys to do it.)

Answer me! This is your "standing alone" is it? This is the power you want?!

(DORA has finally appeared, hesitant.)

EMILIA. *(relieved).* Yes, Dora?

DORA. ‘Scuse me, m’lady. I heard you playing...

EMILIA. *(pause, waiting for DORA to go on).* Yes. *(Beat.)* Yes?

DORA. Uhhh, you’ll be wanted after the next pattern, m’lady. M’Lord Hudson will make the announcement. *(Pause.)* Uhhh, thank you. And ‘scuse me. *(DORA leaves.)*

EMILIA. *(calling after her).* Dora!

WILL. Yes? What part did she leave out?

EMILIA. Leave out?

WILL. She bungled her lines, didn’t she? What “announcement” are we all to hear?

EMILIA. Oh. *(Beat.)* It’s my wedding.

WILL. Wedding?

EMILIA. Yes. To Alfonso Lanier. I’m surprised he wants to announce it so soon.

WILL. Not soon enough. That’s why you’re boarded up like an overheated sausage!

(WILL grabs at EMILIA’s back to tear loose her lacings. She is lifted up).

The blushing bride!

(EMILIA goes limp and WILL relents, embracing her like his life depends on it.)

Emilia.

(For one instant, EMILIA desperately returns WILL’s embrace, but then gathers her strength, to speak fiercely—)

EMILIA. Don’t be a fool. You’ll spoil my chance. Get out!

WILL. *(stunned).* You’re right. You’d ruin me.

EMILIA. Yes.

WILL. Whore.

EMILIA. You see. I always would be to you.

WILL. Court slut.

EMILIA. Get out.

WILL. *(spits at her).* Filth.

(EMILIA doesn’t flinch. WILL turns to leave.)

Wait. That’s too easy.

(WILL looks at EMILIA as though laying a trap.)

Get my letters.

EMILIA. *(startled look at WILL, then pause)*. There's not time.

WILL. You must have them ready. I can't risk my living or my name. Get them.

EMILIA. I'll send them to you.

WILL. Liar. You knew I would ask. Get them!

(EMILIA hesitates, then lifts the seat of the virginal, gets out a packet of letters, hands it to WILL. He tries to hold her gaze, but she steps away. He looks through the packet, and back at her.)

Why wait?

EMILIA. *(can't help looking at him, and at the letters.)* They're all there. Go.

WILL. *(holding a letter between them)*. The sonnets too?

(EMILIA is still as a stone.)

Why would you want them? Why would I?

(WILL thrusts the letter into the candle's flame.)

EMILIA. *(short cry)*. Don't!

WILL. Why?

EMILIA. Don't.

WILL. Why!

EMILIA. Just don't. I... *(WILL embraces EMILIA. She holds him.)*

WILL. Tell me.

(EMILIA looks at WILL, backs away, speaks carefully—)

EMILIA. You want to decide with me? Then come. We'll do it together. My lady Queen taught me how: "I'd never have lived to wear my crown, had I not the wit to stuff my love well behind my advantage." Said she to me. *(EMILIA hands WILL the packet.)*

WILL. Fire is clean.

EMILIA. No. No more fire. Decide.

WILL. *(pause)*. I can't.

DORA. *(calling from off)*. My lady? M'lady, come quick. The Queen.

(MUSIC from the dance.)

(WILL and EMILIA are motionless, facing each other.)

EMILIA. Decide.

DORA. (*calling from off*). She's here herself. She's going to dance.

EMILIA. (*pause*). Decide to be.

(*Silence. WILL and EMILIA formally take leave of each other.*)

WILL. (*heart breaking*). My lady.

EMILIA. Master Shakespeare.

(*WILL exits, carrying the packet. Silence. EMILIA is still—*)

Dora?

DORA. (*from shadows*). Here, m'lady. Is Master Shakespeare...?

EMILIA. Did you hear that chord just now?

DORA. Is he gone?

EMILIA. So odd. I'm sure it wasn't right.

DORA. (*pause*). Come, lady.

EMILIA. (*motionless*). Yes, I'll come.

(*Single light on EMILIA's face as it slowly goes to black.*)

END OF PLAY