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The English Channel

Robert Brustein

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION

**SAMUEL
FRENCH**
FOUNDED 1830

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THE ENGLISH CHANNEL was first produced by the Suffolk University Marilyn Plotkins, Artistic Director) and the Vineyard Playhouse (M.J. Munafó, Artistic Director), at the C. Walsh Theatre and the Vineyard Playhouse in 2007, and then at the Abingdon Theatre (Jan Buttram, Artistic Director) in New York.

The Boston performance was directed by Wesley Savick, with sets by Richard Chambers, costumes by costume designer, etc, etc. The Production Stage Manager was stage manager. The Boston and Vineyard cast was as follows:

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE Gabriel Field
CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE Sean Dugan
HENRY (HAL) WRIOTHESELY,
 THIRD EARL OF SOUTHAMPTON Alex Pollock
EMILIA LANIER Merritt Janson

The New York performance was directed by Daniela Varon, with sets and lighting by Mike Billings, costumes by Laura Crow, sound and music by Scott Killian. The production stage manager was Rebecca L. Hurlbert and the fight choreographer was Stafford Clark-Price. The New York cast was as follows:

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE Stafford Clark-Price
CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE Sean Dugan
HENRY (HAL) WRIOTHESELY,
 THIRD EARL OF SOUTHAMPTON Brian Robert Burns
EMILIA LANIER Lori Gardner

CHARACTERS

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (WILL) – 29

**HENRY (HAL) WRIOTHESLEY (PRONOUNCED “RIZLEY”),
EARL OF SOUTHAMPTON – 19**

CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE (KIT) – 29

EMILIA LANIER – 23

SETTING

A room in the Mermaid Tavern

TIME

The plague year, 1593

PROLOGUE

(Spot on the Ghost of CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE, a great blood stain over his right eye)

MARLOWE'S GHOST. List, list! Oh, list!

I am the ghost of Christopher Marlowe;
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confined to fast in fires...
(breaks off) Belike you've heard those doleful lines
before?

You'll hear them oft again in future times,
The meek Will Shakespeare always put great store
In tarding up my brave iambic rhymes.
Poor poets borrow, greater poets steal,
We all gulp down the same embezzled meal,
But here's the question for your teeth to gnaw at:
Is Will a poetaster, or a poet?
At his fresh age, the answer still is moot,
His seeded fame has not yet taken root,
This errant husband, wayward father, swain,
This bashful yokel, pockets full of grain,
Who leaves his wife, his friends, his babes, his chattel,
To lock himself in fever'sh daily battle
With London's greatest playwrights, poets too,
Reviled and envied by the baser few.
Condemned for now to strut upon the stage,
Or alter and amend another's page,
Or squat at table, cramped in small, dark rooms-
Like this one where our present action looms....

(Lights up on WILL writing on a table in a private room in the tavern. He is twenty-nine, looking like the Grafton

portrait, with the trace of a moustache, a wispy beard, and a ring in his left ear. A palette bed. An Elizabethan armchair. A cabinet. On the wall a cross. Many theatre props, including halberds, broadswords, farthingales, buskins, doublets, hose, crowns, armor, and the like, piled around the room.)

MARLOWE'S GHOST. Let's watch our bending scrivener scribbling here.

It's 1593, a plague-filled year,
The place a stews, yclept the Mermaid Tavern,
Which Keats will liken to a mossy cavern.
I won't be dead until the end of May.
Till then, I'll be a person in this play.

(Exit)

ACT I

WILL. (*reading*) "Is it for fear to wet a widow's eye, That thou consum'st thyself in single life?"

(*blots the page*)

There's for the coupling. And here's for the tripling.

(*writing*)

"Look in thy glass, and tell the face thou viewest Now is the time that face should form another." Aye, that hits it, if rhyming can. Marriage, copulation, and birth.

(*Enter HENRY WRIOTHESLEY, the third EARL OF SOUTHAMPTON, a beautiful slender lad of nineteen with long flowing hair in ringlets, a double earring, painted cheeks and lips, and heavy-lidded eyes. He is waving a sheaf of papers in his hands in mock agitation.*)

SOUTHAMPTON. Master Shakespeare?

WILL. (*rising in agitation*) Your Lordship.

SOUTHAMPTON. You are Master William Shakespeare?

WILL. I am that man, my Lord.

SOUTHAMPTON. I looked for you in Shoreditch. They told me you'd be here.

WILL. My rooms in Shoreditch are contaminate.

SOUTHAMPTON. Like all of London. You make a smaller figure without your paint, your wig, your buskins.

WILL. You have seen me on the stage?

SOUTHAMPTON. Aye, and more than once, though ask not me the plays. I have no memory of diversion once I leave the playhouse. I use it only as a pastime.

WILL. I, too, prefer the purer world of poesy.

SOUTHAMPTON. By constraint I dare say, now that plague has closed the Theatre.

(looking over the costumes and properties in the room)

I suppose the padlocked playhouses account for all this paraphernalia.

WILL. Indeed, sir, our manager has requested me to store these properties in my room.

SOUTHAMPTON. You know my secret longing? To play a monarch on the stage.

(putting a crown on his head, he picks up a mirror and examines himself.) "Is it not passing brave to be a King, and ride in triumph through Persepolis?"

WILL. *(not wild about the references to Tamburlaine)* You know well your Marlowe. But should your Lordship be abroad in such a rank, polluted time?

SOUTHAMPTON. *(placing the crown on a hook and trying on a cloak)* I am too young to dread impending death, too rash to fear its sting. I admire impetuous Tamburlaine, the Scythian shepherd who dared to burn the holy Koran...

WILL. "...and set black streamers in the firmament to signify the slaughter of the gods." I know the play, my Lord.

SOUTHAMPTON. 'Tis good you frequent rival theatres. Poets have much to teach each other. Well, to the matter. You are the author of these verses in my hand?

WILL. *(shyly)* May I see those papers, Lord?

SOUTHAMPTON. *(brusquely thrusting them at him)* I am amazed you haven't seen them, stuck as they are on every tree in Saint James Park.

WILL. I grieve to hear that, my Lord. They were penned for your eyes only.

SOUTHAMPTON. For mine? You know me then?

WILL. All the world does know you, sir. Your name and fame are legendary. But you and I have never met.

SOUTHAMPTON. Then why do you instruct me in my private life, as if you were my tutor.

WILL. Your tutor?

SOUTHAMPTON. On the subject of marrying and having children. (*reads*)

“Die single, and thine image dies with thee.” “Make thee another self, for love of me.” “But were some child of yours alive that time, You should live twice, in it and in my time.”

WILL. (*looking over his shoulder and correcting*) That’s “in my rime.”

SOUTHAMPTON. Infernal impudence!

WILL. Your Lordship, a thousand pardons.

SOUTHAMPTON. Rime, time, who gives a damn.

WILL. I had hoped to present you my poor poems in person when the sequence was complete. Those lines were never writ for public eyes.

SOUTHAMPTON. They are being strewn throughout the city, making me a mockery to the common view.

WILL. But you are nowhere named, sir.

SOUTHAMPTON. But everywhere described. What know you of my life and loves? And why do you urge on me to generate a child? I’m not yet twenty.

WILL. I know, My Lord, but your guardian Lord Burghley...

SOUTHAMPTON. You mean my guard dog Burghley.

WILL. ...is much concerned about your single state.

SOUTHAMPTON. It does not much surprise me. Lord Burghley, my guard dog, would have me marry his granddaughter, thus marry my fortune, and guard dog that as well.

WILL. Ah, that explains his haste to commission my poems.

SOUTHAMPTON. Under commission, are you? How much is he paying?

WILL. Sixpence a sonnet.

SOUTHAMPTON. That much.

(**SHAKESPEARE** *winces*.)

And how many of these bedding and begetting jingles have you written?

WILL. Thus far seventeen, my Lord.

SOUTHAMPTON. I'll give you a shilling a sonnet to change the subject.

WILL. To what?

SOUTHAMPTON. Your choice. God. The Fall of Man. My almond-colored eyes.

WILL. That would be an honor, sir.

SOUTHAMPTON. And five pounds more when you finish the project.

WILL. (*amazed*) You are more than generous, Lord.

SOUTHAMPTON. But blot out these imputations that I waste my seed upon the ground, hear?

WILL. What?

SOUTHAMPTON. (*reading*) "Why dost thou spend upon thyself thy beauty's legacy?... Do not traffic with thyself alone." What should that mean else but self-abuse, that I am having a honeymoon in the hand?

WILL. Mere metaphor, my Lord, in the hortatory mode. But, truly, do I have your lordship's leave to draw your golden countenance in tables of ravishment?

SOUTHAMPTON. You do.

WILL. Then mine brush will celebrate your beauty for all time.

SOUTHAMPTON. I expect you to flatter me. It is the convention. So did Petrarch his Laura and Sidney his Stella.

WILL. Not flattery, my Lord. One cannot offer more than this rich praise, that you alone are you. Hum. That could be something. (*stops to write this down*)

SOUTHAMPTON. Good start. Here's a shilling.

WILL. I am most grateful, my Lord. (*eagerly*) With your leave, Right Honorable, may I broach another subject?

SOUTHAMPTON. Broach away.

WILL. I have a long poem completed, Venus and Adonis, based on Ovid. May I dedicate this, the first heir of my invention, to your Lordship? I would account myself most richly graced.

SOUTHAMPTON. Why not? Like Adonis, I have been pursued by older women.

WILL. And so indeed have I.

SOUTHAMPTON. My library at Titchfield contains three rare editions of Ovid. You must visit me there.

WILL. A private library! I am sore in need of reading matter.

SOUTHAMPTON. For pastime?

WILL. No for stories. I am needful of invented tales.

SOUTHAMPTON. I sense you also need a well-heeled patron.

WILL. I do, my Lord, though I fear to ask so strong a prop to support so weak a burden.

SOUTHAMPTON. Nicely said. You'll no doubt want some cash.

WILL. Whatever your Lordship thinks appropriate.

SOUTHAMPTON. For quills and paper, no?

WILL. I hope some day to have the means to buy a share in our acting company.

SOUTHAMPTON. How much would that take?

WILL. Fifty pounds.

SOUTHAMPTON. Here is ten pounds towards that distant day. Since you are a fountain of rhyme, I must be a wellspring of currency. But whence comes this torrent of sonnets. I thought you a mere player.

WILL. I am, my Lord.

SOUTHAMPTON. And yet a sonneteer?

WILL. Yes, and also sometimes a maker of plays.

SOUTHAMPTON. Ah, so that's why you need those stories.

WILL. Yes, my Lord. My persons are my own. My plots I borrow from others.

SOUTHAMPTON. I remember me now, you wrote those histories of Henry VI.

WILL. (*flattered*) Indeed, I did, sir.

SOUTHAMPTON. And whence came they?

WILL. From the chronicles of Holinshed.

SOUTHAMPTON. I would have guessed from the epics of Marlowe. Your Henrys much resemble Tamburlaine.

WILL. (*dashed*) How so, my Lord?

SOUTHAMPTON. A two-part vaulting history, composed in unrhymed five-stress ten-syllable iambs?

WILL. (*defensive*) I have written a third part. And am framing a fourth.

SOUTHAMPTON. Good, then there's hope some day you may outreach the famous Overreacher himself.

WILL. Your Lordship's knowledge of Marlowe's writing continues to impress me.

SOUTHAMPTON. I learned prosody at the age of twelve at St. John's College, Cambridge, from the poet himself. It was the author of Doctor Faustus who taught me how to scan a verse...

WILL. Indeed!

SOUTHAMPTON. ...and cut a purse.

WILL. A cutpurse? You!

SOUTHAMPTON. I was the decoy, he the thief. That's how Marlowe kept his brain awake when his Muse was nodding.

(The door bursts open and CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE enters, carrying a book, which he throws upon the table.)

MARLOWE. I thought I'd find you at the Mermaid here, dodging those dodgy corpses in the street. Have you seen this slanderous piece of.... (*peering at SOUTHAMPTON*) Now who is *this* comely youth?

SOUTHAMPTON. You do not know me?

MARLOWE. The eyes I know.

SOUTHAMPTON. Henry Wriothesley. The boy that you called Hal.

MARLOWE. By heaven, the boy that I called Hal. And nearer to heaven than when I saw him last. My gamesome Hal. My captivating Helen.

WILL. What?

MARLOWE. This lad played Helen of Troy when Faustus was first performed at Cambridge. Age...what? Thirteen? And such a beauty! "Was this the face that launched a thousand ships....? Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss."

(And he kisses SOUTHAMPTON full on the mouth. SOUTHAMPTON returns it. SHAKESPEARE looks on in astonishment.)

MARLOWE. What are you gaping at? Those are fools who love not tobacco and boys.

SOUTHAMPTON. No more a boy, Kit. I'll soon be twenty.

MARLOWE. Old enough to have a boy of your own, I'll warrant.

WILL. Indeed, Lord Burghley has been strongly urging him to marry and make an heir.

MARLOWE. *(wryly)* That's not what I meant. *(to SOUTHAMPTON)* So what are you up to, Hal? Still accomplicing cutpurses?

SOUTHAMPTON. I have advanced beyond that subtle art you taught me.

MARLOWE. So I hear. Rumor has you plotting rebellion with the malcontent Essex. Stay far from him. He is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upwards.

SOUTHAMPTON. Well, rumor has you a government spy in the pay of the Queen.

MARLOWE. Rumor is a false wench, who would paint libels on a saint. No, I'm just a penurious poet, finishing off his latest play. Which will amaze the world once they reopen those pest-ridden playhouses.

WILL. And the title?

MARLOWE. The Massacre at Paris. Guise and the French Catholics slaughter all the Protestant Huegenots. Delicious carnage. Gouts and gouts of blood.

WILL. Why stir up strife against the Catholics, Kit? Recusants suffer too much as it is.

MARLOWE. So long as the action swells and rouses, Will.
Catholic, Protestant, Anabaptist or Puritan, it's all the
same mendacity. Christianity's a fraud –

WILL. Lower your voice.

MARLOWE. ...Jesus was a bastard –

WILL. Shhh!

MARLOWE. ...and his mother was a whore.

WILL. Kit, that's damned heresy!

MARLOWE. And John the Evangelist used Christ as did the
sinners of Sodom.

WILL. A capital offense.

MARLOWE. So are buggery and sorcery, both of which
I practice.

SOUTHAMPTON. Under protection of the Queen's
Protestant piety.

MARLOWE. What mean you?

SOUTHAMPTON. She has not recruited you to sniff out
Catholics?

MARLOWE. That's a lie!

SOUTHAMPTON. And placed you in the employ of her
spymaster, the malformed Robert Cecil?

MARLOWE. Another damnable lie!

SOUTHAMPTON. Well, lay the blame on that painted wench,
Rumor. I must go.

MARLOWE. So soon, Hal? I long to hear how have you fared
since your father's death? Is your mother still alive? Is
she still succoring Papist priests?

(He pronounces this with the emphasis on "suck.")

SOUTHAMPTON. I no longer see the wretched woman. And
who inquires after Papist priests? My friend? Or the
Queen's ear?

MARLOWE. Your friend, Hal, your friend. Forever your
friend.

SOUTHAMPTON. My business here is done. Until next week, Master Shakespeare, when I expect a dozen fresh new sonnets in my hand.

WILL. I will not sleep until that day, your Lordship. I will write until my fingers bleed.

SOUTHAMPTON. And you hear? No more about matrimony and parenthood. (*to MARLOWE*) Farewell, Kit. We will meet again.

MARLOWE. You will not stay the night, and join your old teacher in snatching a few purses? 'Tis an easy practice now the Watch is shunning the streets.

SOUTHAMPTON. Who, I rob? I a thief? Not I, by my faith.

MARLOWE. Then farewell to you, Hal, my heart, my bountiful boy.

(**SOUTHAMPTON** *exits*. *To WILL*.)

Have you done him yet?

WILL. Done what?

MARLOWE. Made him your bumboy. He's always had the roundest rump in Christendom. When still a stripling, he was my model for Ganymede, Jupiter's cupbearing catamite. Is he your cupbearer?

WILL. He is my new patron, for whom I feel a ripening friendship. More like my Damon.

MARLOWE. You mean your Pyth-i-ass.

WILL. The warm regard I feel for him resembles more that perfect love idealized by the Greek philosophers.

MARLOWE. Plato's ideal love was paederastice and Socrates was forced to swallow hemlock juice for bugging schoolboys. (*He is looking over WILL's writings*.)

WILL. Nay, ideal love is innocent and pure.

MARLOWE. You call this pure, this panegyric to a male paramour?

(*picking up one of WILL's verses*)

WILL. Don't touch that!

MARLOWE. (*ignoring him, and holding the verse away as WILL tries to snatch it*) "A woman's face with Nature's own hand painted Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion...."

Master-mistress! That is hot ice and black snow. And who could be the inspiration for this oxymoronic androgyny? Hal?

WILL. (*blushing*) In my imagination—

MARLOWE. (*continuing to read*) "A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted With shifting change, as is false woman's fashion..." Sounds like buggery to me.

WILL. Poetic license —

MARLOWE. Poetic licentiousness. Your tongue speaks ideal love, but your pistol is cocked for action.

WILL. The poem merely confirms the Earl a courteous and exquisite gentleman...

(*He puts this and his other sonnets into his closet and locks it.*)

MARLOWE. And full of game, I'll testify.

WILL. ...a fresh and delicate young courtier. Well worthy of an honest woman's love.

MARLOWE. And why not a man's? Don't reverence love, you animal, don't reverence love. It is but a lust of the blood and a permission of the will.

WILL. Hum. That could be something. (*He writes it down.*)

MARLOWE. Still ransacking my ship of verse, you poet-pirate?

WILL. What?

MARLOWE. My lines. My personages. My plays. You've filched enough of my lines to persuade the world you're an imposter — a Stratford bumpkin impersonating the great Kit Marlowe, or the great Kit Marlowe masquerading as a Stratford bumpkin. Next they'll be whispering you did not write your plays.

WILL. Who wrote them then?

MARLOWE. Why, any fool with a foolish piece of foolscap.
(*laughing*) Oxford. Bacon. Me.

WILL. You?

MARLOWE. Which reminds me, have you seen this? (*picks up the book he threw on the table*).

WILL. What?

MARLOWE. Bob Greene's Groatsworth of Wit.

WILL. A bad poet, a worse playwright.

MARLOWE. He's on his deathbed, fighting for breath and defaming his betters. He calls me atheist, which I freely confess, and "a famous gracer of tragedians," which I would confess did I understand the meaning. What he says of you will wait until we've had that perfect potion for this pesky pestilence, a pot of ale.
(*calling*) Francis!!

VOICE. Yes, sir.

MARLOWE. Two pints for me and one more for my friend.

VOICE. Anon, anon, sir!

MARLOWE. Anon, anon, sir. That means next Wednesday. Regarding you, Master William Shakespeare, Master Greene, that decomposing sack of compost, inscribes the following: (*reading*) "For there is an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers, that in his tiger's heart wrapped in a player's hide..."

WILL. "Wrapped in a woman's hide!" That line he stole from my Henrys. And "beautified" is an ill phrase, a vile phrase.

MARLOWE. May I continue? "...this upstart crow..."

WILL. You don't have to repeat it!

MARLOWE. "...supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you, and is in his own conceit the only Shakescene in the country."

(*SHAKESPEARE groans.*)

Confess it. Is there not a grainsworth of truth buried in this groatsworth of shit? Do you not steal?

WILL. Who asks? Kit the cutpurse?

MARLOWE. No, Marlowe the Magnificent.

WILL. I do not well understand this envious malice. An upstart crow?

MARLOWE. Meaning one cannot write a proper line of blank verse without a sound classical education.

WILL. I have a sound classical education.

MARLOWE. Ben Jonson, himself an uneducated son of a bricklayer, has been overheard to say you have small Latin and less Greek.

WILL. Another envious man.

MARLOWE. And do you not envy your betters? Next they'll be whispering you did not write your plays.

WILL. Who wrote them then?

MARLOWE. Why, any fool with a foolish piece of foolscap.

(laughing)

Oxford. Bacon. Me.

WILL. You?

MARLOWE. Are we not two peas in a peascod? Am I not your better-educated, more capable duplicate? I am twenty-nine, and you are....?

WILL. Twenty-nine.

MARLOWE. I a cobbler's son, you a... What was your father, then?

WILL. A glover.

MARLOWE. A glover.

WILL. And later a wool dealer.

MARLOWE. Which explains your weakness for woolgathering. A wool dealer, you say? A prosperous trade. Why did he not send you to university?

WILL. Marriage was my university. I entered that stifling cloister at age eighteen with a bride of twenty-six.

MARLOWE. And a bun in the oven, I'll warrant, before the marriage meats were warm?

WILL. A baby girl, yes, three months on the way.

MARLOWE. An o'erhasty marriage followed by a swift retreat to London to seek your fortune on the stage. What is the name of this seductress, I wonder?

WILL. Ann Hathaway.

MARLOWE. Of course. You had your will but Ann hath her way.

WILL. (*bitter*) I was a boy, hot for any wench who'd have me. This one did. In a cornfield. I ploughed her, and she cropped.

MARLOWE. And now she sits in Stratford, like patient Griselda, waiting for Wandering Will to return to his deserted wife and abandoned child.

WILL. Children, actually. After Susannah, we had twins. Hamnet and Judith.

MARLOWE. Hamnet. Is that not a Danish name?

WILL. Not that I know.

MARLOWE. A prince in Saxo Grammaticus whose uncle kills his father and marries his mother.

WILL. Not a bad idea for a play.

MARLOWE. No, I'm thinking of Hamlet. It has been written. Didn't you know? By my chamber-mate Thom Kyd.

WILL. All the great stories are already told.

MARLOWE. That's why you steal, dear Will. That's why you steal.

(Knock at the door. MARLOWE opens it, and comes back with three pots of ale.)

MARLOWE. Here we are. A harmony of hops and malt.

(He downs two pots in two gulps. SHAKESPEARE sips at his.)

So, Will is alone in plague-ridden London, his theatre closed, his occupation gone, unwived, unwomaned, and unwanted. That condition must be changed,

and swiftly, too. Let me see. I have it. There is a lady presently at court, her name Emilia Lanier, that is as lovely as a night in May. Jet-black hair, onyx eyes, olive skin. If I weren't a confirmed sodomite, I would thump her myself.

WILL. And she's unmarried?

MARLOWE. No, there's the thing. She was the mistress of Lord Hunsdon, a patron of your company, no? She conceived a child by him, though he was old enough to be her grandsire. And so he married her off to Alfonso Lanier, a musician, providing him a large pension, a basketful of jewels, and a big-bellied wife.

WILL. She belongs to another, then.

MARLOWE. Why, so do you, man, so do you. Her husband cares not whom she beds so long as he can fish for trout in other waters.

WILL. And she is dark.

MARLOWE. If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head. But I think you'll find her lovely beyond compare. (*WILL is writing.*) Stop writing, damn you!

WILL. What is her breeding?

MARLOWE. She has none. The bastard daughter of a convert Jew of Venice. Shall I bring her to you? You'll never want another woman.

WILL. A Jewess of Venice, pandered by the man who wrote The Jew of Malta?

MARLOWE. She is a lot more desirable than Barabas, I assure you.

WILL. She doesn't poison wells or kill sick people groaning under walls?

MARLOWE. Poetic license, as you say, Will. Poetic license.

WILL. That character was excessive, Kit. I think were I to write a Jew...

MARLOWE. And you will, Master Shakescene, you will.

WILL. ...he would have some saving grace, whate'er his savage nature.

MARLOWE. Would he also have a beautiful daughter who turns Christian and runs off with a poet? I can provide the model.

WILL. Bring her then. And I will stain my marriage bed again.

MARLOWE. (*going*) One thing more. I have penned a poem that wants a patron. You may guess I intend to solicit Hal. He has pockets deep enough for both of us.

WILL. (*dashed*) I cannot stop you. But you accuse me of stealing. Is not that a kind of theft as well?

MARLOWE. Not a worry, Will. I will bring you back a prize worth all the Earl's revénue.

(MARLOWE exits, lights dim to suggest a passage of time and he returns immediately with EMILIA LANIER, twenty-three years old, as dark and beautiful as she was described.)

ACT II

MARLOWE. And here she is. Sir Troilus, prepare to meet your Cressida.

(WILL rises from his chair. He and EMILIA look at each other. Long pause.)

EMILIA. I blush, Master Shakespeare, at the fulfillment of a deep desire. I have long longed to meet the man who wrote Titus Andronicus. He is poised to become an immortal English playwright.

WILL. Where did you find this shrewd judicious lady? I discover myself of a sudden strangely drawn to her.

MARLOWE. Of course you are, man. Whoever loved that loved not at first sight, as another immortal playwright wrote. Me, of course.

WILL. An immortal who wants to steal my patron?

MARLOWE. An immortal who needs to have a drink. *(calls out)* Francis!! Fetch me a cup of canary.

FRANCIS. *(off)* Anon, anon, sir.

MARLOWE. That means next Shrovetide. Well, I will leave you together for closer acquaintance, whilst I prevail upon the tapster below to draw that heady brew. Farewell, Emilia, till we meet again at court. *(slaps her on the rump and leaves)*

EMILIA. A perplexing man, Kit Marlowe. That such an aspiring mind could companion such a paltry spirit.

WILL. Another spirit inhabits him, a rash and dangerous thing I do not understand.

EMILIA. Know you he was charged with murder once and sent to Newgate?

WILL. Kit in prison?

EMILIA. They held him two weeks, and released him. He has powerful friends.

WILL. Kit is too familiar with the murderous Machiavel and other such Italian villains. (*embarrassed pause*) I am told there is Italian blood in you.

EMILIA. My late father was Baptista Bassano.

WILL. (*writing*) Baptista. Bassano. Good names for a play.

EMILIA. Perhaps you knew of him? A Venetian famous for the viol de gambol in the court of our late King Henry. I myself do play recorder for the Queen.

WILL. And that explains the music of your voice.

EMILIA. (*mock curtsey*) Why thank you, la.

WILL. Wilt play for me?

EMILIA. With pleasure Master Shakespeare. (*And she plays "Hey ho, the wind and the rain."*)

WILL. Most lovely. With your sweet fingers, you make dead wood more blest than living lips.

EMILIA. And your sweet lips make language blessed, too.

WILL. I hear no trace of Italy in your speech.

EMILIA. I was a babe when Father brought me to these shores.

(*beat*)

WILL. Kit tells me Lord Hunsdon was your friend.

EMILIA. My protector...

WILL. Yes.

EMILIA. ...and the father of my daughter. Though fifty years my senior.

WILL. (*embarrassed at her frankness*) I see.

EMILIA. Yes, my daughter is a bastard, and the daughter of a bastard. But Lord Hunsdon has been kind to me. He brought me to your plays.

WILL. You are a lover of the theatre?

EMILIA. Of the persons that you write.

WILL. I love them, too, when they do not crowd me from the room.

EMILIA. What mean you?

WILL. Sometimes they make demands on me that drain my strength.

EMILIA. You speak as one who does not command his creations.

WILL. I am more their hostage than their host.

EMILIA. But yet their sole begetter.

WILL. Better say their conduit, their passage to the outside world. At times they come to me when I'm asleep, sometimes when I lie sleepless, demanding entry. Their hungry voices clamoring in my ear, they plead for life. And once I give them life, they plead for greater life.

EMILIA. What kind of life?

WILL. Oh, that I correct their meter, improve their speech, enlarge their parts, as if they were my fellow actors on the stage. I have no rest or peace from their entreaties.

EMILIA. They are well worth your sleeplessness.

WILL. (*flattered*) You think so? And which of them do you fancy most?

EMILIA. Why, Katherina, your Paduan shrew. I love her spirit and her wit. Though sad I was to see her bending at the end.

WILL. Ah, perhaps that surrender was but feigned, and she has won the victory after all.

EMILIA. How well you know our weaknesses and strengths. Not Chapman, not Lyly, and certainly not Marlowe can match your knowledge of the female heart.

WILL. I thank you, but no one truly knows a woman's heart.

EMILIA. I'll be your instructor, beginning with a lesson in anatomy.

(*She puts his hand upon her breast.*)

WILL. That hemisphere is rounded, full, and temperate. I'll try its twin to test the symmetry.

(*WILL puts his hand on the other breast.*)

EMILIA. I see you're familiar with the Northern countries.

WILL. I would explore the nether regions, too. So, patiently and yielding...

(They go into a deep kiss.)

You have witchcraft in your lips.

(The lights fade for a moment. When they go on again, EMILIA is lying on the palette bed, naked from the waist up, and WILL is writing at his desk, wiping his forehead with an embroidered handkerchief with strawberries on it.)

EMILIA. Where is my lover? Why is he a stranger to my bed?

WILL. I am a native of every nation in your body.

EMILIA. Nay, there are territories still left unexplored.

WILL. Some later time. The desire may be boundless, but the act is slave to limit.

EMILIA. Most lovers swear more performance than they are able. But you promise less. Come back to bed, if but to sleep.

WILL. I am at my table, my love, composing a sonnet stirred by you.

EMILIA. Read it me.

WILL. You will not like it.

EMILIA. Try me anyway.

WILL. "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun; Coral is far more red than her lips' red; If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun; If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head."

EMILIA. And that is praise?

WILL. Actually, Marlowe gave me the black wires. The rest is mine. "I have seen roses damask'd, red and white, But no such roses see I in her cheeks; And in some perfumes is there more delight Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks."

EMILIA. Will! My God!

WILL. "I love to hear her speak..."

EMILIA. At last! A compliment.

WILL. "...yet well I know That music hath a far more pleasing sound; I grant I never saw a goddess go; My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground..."

EMILIA. And that's a love poem, Will? I have heard more fulsome panegyrics uttered to a horse.

WILL. Ah, but you haven't heard the final couplet: "And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare As any she belied with false compare."

EMILIA. (*She rises from the bed to throw her arms around his shoulders.*) Don't compare women, sweet Will, and do not libel us neither. We endure enough slander from the mouths of men. I have written poetry about that subject myself. Would you care to hear a stanza?

WILL. I am working, fair Emilia. Perhaps a quatrain.

EMILIA. Why then, a couplet. (*Clears her throat*) "God bless my soul, why are poor women blamed, Or by more faulty men so much defamed." (*Nervous*) What do you think?

WILL. A bit doggerel-like, perhaps, but you make your case. Are all your verses written in defense of women?

EMILIA. Not all women.

WILL. Who are the exceptions?

EMILIA. Why, those forgetful they were born of women, nourished of women, who do like vipers deface the wombs wherein they breed.

WILL. 'Tis true that women first brought sin into the world.

EMILIA. And men who first traduced them to it. Will, you disappoint me. You repeat the same libels on our sex as I daily hear at court.

WILL. At court is where your sex is most exposed.

EMILIA. Do I hear a hint of woman-hatred in your tone? I imagined the author of *Titus* a more liberal man.

WILL. How so?

EMILIA. A poet who could imagine both the virtuous Lavinia and the lustful Queen Tamora?

WILL. Well, the world is peopled with the innocent and the impure. I am charged to give a voice to all.

EMILIA. And in which pigeonhole will you stuff me?

WILL. That will depend upon what bird you prove to be.

EMILIA. What kind of bird are you, that wears his wedding ring in his ear?

WILL. Why, one who listens for the cuckoo's call.

EMILIA. And has the cuckoo called to you?

WILL. My wife is far away. I visit her but once a year.

EMILIA. She is made of flesh like you. She has her appetites as well.

WILL. And what of wedding vows? Are those mere words?

(He is wiping his brow with the handkerchief.)

EMILIA. *(taking his handkerchief)* Is this your handkerchief? It is more like a woman's.

WILL. My mother gave it me.

EMILIA. I'll take it as a keepsake of this precious night.

WILL. Of which you've had a number, I would guess.

EMILIA. *(stung)* I am not your wife. For affection to grow, it must be nourished on courtesy.

WILL. I grant you that.

EMILIA. And honesty as well. You know I am married.

WILL. I do, Emilia.

EMILIA. And you are not my first lover.

WILL. I have guessed at that.

EMILIA. And may not be the last.

WILL. That thought has dawned on me as well.

EMILIA. And will that be a cause for pouring infamy on our sex?

(WILL is silent.)

EMILIA. This napkin I shall cherish. But let me leave some token in exchange. How like you this my instrument?

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