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Mortal Terror

Robert Brustein

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION

**SAMUEL
FRENCH**
FOUNDED 1830

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MORTAL TERROR was first produced by the Suffolk Theatre and Boston Playwrights Theatre, at the Modern Theatre, Boston, in 2011. The performance was directed by Daniela Varon, with sets by Jon Savage, costumes by Rachel Padula Shufell, lighting by Frank Meissner, Jr., and sound by David Remedios. The Production Stage Manager was L. Arkansas Light. The cast was as follows:

SIR JOHN HARINGTON. Dafydd Ap Rees
WILL SHAKESPEARE. Stafford Clark-Price
JOHN MARSTON John Kuntz
BEN JONSON Jeremiah Kissel
KING JAMES.. Michael Hammond
QUEEN ANNE. Georgia Liman
ROBERT CATESBY...... Christopher James Webb
GUY FAWKES, ALSO KNOWN AS GUIDO. John Kuntz

CHARACTERS

WILL SHAKESPEARE – 41, poet and playwright

JOHN MARSTON – 29, satirist and playwright

BEN JONSON – 33, poet and playwright

SIR JOHN HARINGTON – 44, courtier and poet

KING JAMES I OF ENGLAND – 39, author of *Daemonologie*

ANNE OF DENMARK – 31

ROBERT CATESBY – 39, a Catholic nobleman, 39

GUY FAWKES – 35, a terrorist

(The action moves freely from place to place so the scenery should be spare, suggestive, versatile. The time is 1605 – just two years after a recurrence of the fearsome bubonic pestilence called The Black Death which had hit London once again, this time taking 33,000 lives. We are in a room in Cripplegate, SHAKESPEARE's digs during the year of these happenings. Spartan accommodations. A writing table with quills and ink and pages. The lights come up on WILL writing. He is 41, older now by twelve years than in The English Channel. Quite elegant and aristocratic as in the newly-discovered Cobbes portrait. His face has kept its good nature, though it is not a stranger to melancholy, expectant of more ill fortune to come.)

(A thin scarecrow figure dressed all in black bursts into the room, his face muffled with a scarf.)

MARSTON. Will, for the sake of my safety and your salvation, give me sanctuary!

WILL. *(skeptical)* And what muffled stranger is this demands my sanctuary?

MARSTON. *(removing the scarf)* You do not recognize the features of your feckless fellow fabulist, John Marston?

WILL. Marston!

MARSTON. Conceal me for Christ's sake! I'm in mortal terror. That personage is severely demented.

WILL. What "personage" do you mean, man?

MARSTON. Why, him, *him*. The lunatical Ben Jonson.

WILL. Irritable, yes, splenetic perhaps, but rarely lunatical, as you call him.

MARSTON. Hush. No time for further expostulation. I hear his thunderous boots upon the passage stairwell. *(harsh whisper)* HIDE ME!

(sound of heavy boots coming up the stairs)

WILL. In there. And be still! (*WILL pushes MARSTON offstage as if into a cupboard*)

(Enter BEN JONSON, red-faced and breathless, carrying a whip. At this time, BEN is about thirty-three, but already seems physically middle-aged. He is heavy and bulbous-nosed and deliberate in his movements.)

BEN. Where is that constipated little poetaster? I'll be damned if I didn't see his blotchy backside bobbing up your stairs!

WILL. Calm, Ben. You are as rigid as a fence pole.

BEN. I'll squash that noxious piece of vermin like a horse fly. Marston's here, I know it! You can smell his farts whenever he's in panic. Who else expresses fear in such a glandular manner?

WILL. Tush! The man is but a harmless little scribbler.

BEN. With the cheek to insult his betters from the public stage.

WILL. He insulted you?

BEN. Through the mouth of one of his crapulous characters.

WILL. I would have accepted that as tribute.

BEN. Have you seen the play?

WILL. Which play?

BEN. A fusillade of fanciful fantasies called *What You Will*.

WILL. That was my subtitle for *Twelfth Night*.

BEN. He's indiscriminate, he steals from anyone.

WILL. Still, you have to grant him an innovative style.

BEN. Style? Those ugly grunts he substitutes for human speech? Those noxious neologisms he passes off as verse?

WILL. He is indeed unrivaled at torturing the English language.

BEN. If the Bishop of London had not banned literary satire, Marston would still be secreting his scurrilous poisons in penny bookstores, not on the public stage.

WILL. So the tables were turned, and you, the great mocker, were mocked.

BEN. As an oversexed scholar and morbid malcontent.

WILL. But Marston worships malcontents. Didn't he dedicate his play of that name to you?

BEN. He did say I was the model for his Malevole. But that foul wretch was stitched out of his own rotting soul, a pimple-assed coward who cannot even break wind without snarling.

(A chorus of breaking wind can be heard in SHAKESPEARE's cupboard.)

Is that the villain in question stinking up your cupboard in there? Let's have him out. *(He goes off stage and returns, violently pulling the hapless MARSTON onto the floor, and snapping the whip around his cringing body.)*

MARSTON. Don't disfigure me, Ben. I beg of you.

BEN. I'll whip you into messes.

MARSTON. Beware! I bear a firearm fully cocked. Abuse me and I shall be obliged to discharge this lethal armament against your intimidating personage. *(Reaches into his pocket and pulls out a pistol. With his whip, JONSON snaps the pistol out of his hand, picks it up, and brandishes it.)*

BEN. You dare to pull a pistol on me!

MARSTON. Show clemency. I have a helpless spouse, two tender lambkins.

WILL. Be friends, you English fools. There are villains enough abroad, more deserving of your wrath.

BEN. *(putting the pistol in his belt)* I didn't come here to snuff him. I came here to purge him. The man stinks both inside and out. Will, fetch me that wash basin there.

(He drags MARSTON to a chair, wraps a napkin around his neck, as if preparing him for barbering, thrusts a wash basin in his hands, throws a vial of liquid down his throat, holds his jaws shut and rubs his back until he swallows it, and stands behind him, choosing words from MARSTON's writings, MARSTON whimpering throughout.)

BEN. All right now, you paltry poltroon, prepare to disgorge all those ugly coinages you have lately been spewing into the public ear: “Oblitrant...furibund...turgidious.”

MARSTON. (*choking*) “Oblitrant...furibund...turgidious.”

BEN. “Glibbery...lubrical...defunct.” Vomit them up!

MARSTON. “Glibbery...lubrical..defunct.” Oh, I feel sick.

WILL. Be careful, Ben. Those polysyllabic hairballs could splinter his vocal chords.

BEN. (*unheeding*) Now these: “spurious...snotteries...chilblained.”

MARSTON. “Spurious...snotteries...chilblained.” Objection! “Chilblained” is a familiar medical utterance, linguistically legitimized...

BEN. Repeat! “Chilblained...obstupefact...fatuate.”

MARSTON. “Chilblained...obstupefact...fatuate.”

WILL. Have pity, Ben. I think all his gallstones have been spewed out by now.

BEN. (*to MARSTON*) Gagging, are we? Help yourself a little with your finger.

MARSTON. (*his finger down his throat*) Oh, oh, oh (*as if vomiting*) ”prorumped...snarling guts...quaking custard.”

BEN. Good.

WILL. (*pitying MARSTON*) Ben.

BEN. Enough for now. Your constitution partially restored, you are released forthwith, provided you keep your vocabulary free of loathsome Latinate locutions. For a restorative, I recommend daily readings in early English authors like Langland and Chaucer where you will learn to fuck, not fornicate, piss, not urinate, belch, not eructate, and fart, not flatulate—the last, God willing, out of smell-shot of civilized people. By night, you will study Horace regarding the true purpose of literature, which is to amuse and instruct, not abuse and insult. Should you need another purgative, eat your own plays.

MARSTON. (*getting out of the chair and throwing down the napkin and the basin*) I'll be revenged on you, Ben Jonson, I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you.

(**MARSTON** storms out of the room and down the stairs.)

WILL. He even stole his exit line—from my *Malvolio*.

BEN. Larcenous lout. A poet pissing against the wind.

WILL. Ben, you must learn to master your temper. You might have killed the beggar.

BEN. If I wanted to kill him, I would have peppered him with his own pistol. But it wasn't worth another prison term.

WILL. When did you serve in Newgate? Five years ago?

BEN. Seven next Shrovetide.

WILL. And all for engaging in a pointless duel. Why would you kill a poor actor?

BEN. Why, for being a poor actor.

WILL. Ben, you are sometimes subject to the most violent humours.

BEN. Not all of us can be meek and modest like our gentle Shakespeare here. You give offense to no one—least of all authority.

WILL. Offending people is not my purpose. I am no satirist.

BEN. That month in Newgate was a torment. Vermin in the bed. Worms in the food. Buggery in the jakes.

WILL. (*trying to ignore this*) A month was a very short sentence for a charge of manslaughter.

BEN. I pleaded benefit of clergy.

WILL. You a clergyman?

BEN. I managed to cough up enough Biblical Latin to confound the constabulary with my clerical skills. I was freed from all charges in return for an etching on my thumb. This one. (*showing his right thumb*)

WILL. M?

BEN. M for murderer. That's how our sainted sovereign rewarded her chosen playwright.

WILL. Nonsense, Ben, our late Queen Bess did ever hold you in the highest favor.

BEN. So long as I praised her royal maidenhead. I should have stayed an actor, like you, Will. By now, I would have earned a fellowship in a cry of players.

WILL. Perhaps our new king will increase the royal allowance to the playhouses.

BEN. Not for my kind of work. Our jejune Jamie, like your pompous Polonius, prefers a tale of bawdry or he sleeps.

WILL. (*hesitantly*) Last week, I received a summons from Whitehall. I suspect the King may want a play of me.

BEN. (*agitated with envy*) No, really? On what subject?

WILL. I have yet to be told.

BEN. More likely your invitation came from the Scottish King's Danish consort. Queen Anne is the real theatre enthusiast, and is paying a royal ransom for court masques. I have already dashed off two dozen for her, my major source of income.

WILL. Masques? I cannot abide those shallow spectacles.

BEN. Nor can I. But God gave us mouths to feed and stomachs to fill. And Queen Anne has inexhaustible fodder. The jewels she wore in *The Coronation Triumph* alone cost the treasury a hundred thousand pounds.

WILL. Write plays, man, not silly spectacles about dated Roman deities.

BEN. This from the man who cannot start a tragedy without the help of some ghostly apparition? (*acting the part with exaggeration*) "I am thy father's spirit, doomed for a certain time to walk the earth..."

WILL. (*impatiently interrupting*) Ghosts are legitimate theatrical devices, Ben, with roots in traditional Christian theology. But classical mythology is pure contrivance.

BEN. Had you acquired more learning, Will, you would speak less rubbish. But you're right about masques.

Machinery, treadmills, waterfalls, fireworks – no one listens to a play any more, they just ogle the costumes and go home singing the scenery.

WILL. Empty spectacle.

BEN. I envy your capacity for choice. My treasury is empty.

WILL. You've wasted your entire legacy?

BEN. Why else write masques? The remains of my meager savings were spent on burying my only son.

WILL. (*puts his arms around BEN to comfort him*) I buried a son, too, Ben. The worst thing that can happen to a man. But is your wife unable to bear another son?

BEN. My wife is a fallow plant. And yours?

WILL. Nearing fifty. Also past child-bearing.

BEN. Eight years your senior. Did you always fancy older women?

WILL. At eighteen, you fancy any woman who wiggles her body parts at you. And if you have the bad luck to impregnate one, you're bound to her for life. Twenty-three years of bondage in exchange for a few minutes of pleasure.

BEN. So that's why you left for London—to marry the theatre instead, and generate newborns twice every year upon the stage. No interest then in a return to Stratford?

WILL. No. No desire to settle into a glover's trade and spend my life raising children, like my Dad.

BEN. My story is the same. My stepfather was a bricklayer. But I had this hunger for learning and this talent for classical farce. What was I to do? Bake bricks instead of plays? Spend my life feeding ovens and furnaces?

WILL. (*raising his glass*) To the playhouse!

BEN. (*following suit*) To the playhouse!

WILL. To large visions...

BEN. ...and small beer.

(*A great deal of coughing and harumphing are heard off stage, and a loud voice shouting "Where is this lad? Where is this heart?"*)

(An aging nobleman enters the room, the great Elizabethan courtier, **SIR JOHN HARINGTON**. He goes directly to **WILL** and holds him by the shoulders, looking fondly into his eyes.)

SIR JOHN. My dear Will. I expected to find you home.

WILL. And I would have thought you in Whitehall, dear Sir John.

SIR JOHN. No, sweet Will, I no longer much visit the court, unless commanded there by the Scot whose rump now fills the royal throne. No past favorite of the former Queen finds any favor with the present King.

WILL. (to **BEN**) Ben, do you know this good old knight, the celebrated godson of our late Queen Bess? Sir John Harington, meet Ben Jonson.

BEN. A pleasure, Sir John. Your name and fame are legendary.

SIR JOHN. And so indeed are yours. I was on my feet in the theatre applauding your *Every Man In His Humour*.

BEN. And I was on my arse in the privy admiring your *Metamorphosis of Ajax*.

SIR JOHN. A perfect platform from which to view my modest labors.

WILL. Why's that?

BEN. Don't you know? This is the genius who invented the flushing toilet.

SIR JOHN. One of my cunningest contraptions.

WILL. Ajax. A jakes. How did I miss the pun in that title? From the depths of my bowels, I thank you.

BEN. Speaking of bowels, I must attend to mine. I was so busy purging Marston I neglected my own ablutions. And I still have a half-hour masque to write for our Queen Anne.

SIR JOHN. Farewell, Ben Jonson.

BEN. Goodbye, Sir John. And goodbye, Will. If you're ever in need of cash, think again about writing a masque for the Queen. (*embraces him and leaves*)

SIR JOHN. A great talent, but born for trouble.

WILL. I am unduly fond of the man.

SIR JOHN. And he of you, quite obviously. Indeed, the respect with which you are universally held is the reason I am here. What are your relations with the new crowd at court?

WILL. As yet untested, thus untroubled. King James has adopted our company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, renaming it the Kings Men in return for a promise of royal patronage. On Tuesday, as it happens, I have been summoned to the palace to discuss a special project with him.

SIR JOHN. (*skeptical*) He is acquainted with your writing?

WILL. A play or two of mine has apparently kept him conscious for a while.

SIR JOHN. His approbation is predicated on one's good opinion of *him*. I visited court just a few days ago, summoned there on a scholar's errand. Contrary to all educated opinion, our King still holds a belief in witches. He has even written a treatise called *Daemonologie* approving the garroting of these innocent grannies. My approval of his brainless monograph was duly solicited. He was particularly concerned to know why witchcraft worked more powerfully on ancient women than on the young.

WILL. And your reply?

SIR JOHN. That according to Scripture, the devil likes to walk in dry places.

WILL. A merry answer.

SIR JOHN. He did not laugh.

WILL. No?

SIR JOHN. He is more given to Celtic barks than English guffaws. Aye me, what a transformation from the days of good Queen Bess.

WILL. In what way?

SIR JOHN. The Queen talked always of love and affection, this King preaches fear and submission. And his innovations! Did you know that court ladies now act upon the stage? Our good Queen Anne provides the example.

WILL. Women players! That *is* a novelty.

SIR JOHN. Our good King James is more aroused by male players. This ruler is much attracted to good looks and handsome accoutrements.

WILL. Who is his current favorite?

SIR JOHN. Robert Carr, who has publicly announced that the King's roan jennet surpasses Bucephalus and is worthy to be ridden by Alexander.

WILL. Flattery is nothing new at court.

SIR JOHN. What is new is a kingdom corrupt in its business dealings, dissolute in its sexual habits, intolerant in its religious practices – the very conditions that you, Will Shakespeare, have been accustomed to condemn in your plays. And this brings me to my reason for coming. You want a commission? Write a play denouncing this dishonorable regime.

WILL. Denunciation is not my talent or my calling.

SIR JOHN. Then how explain your *Tragedy of Lear*, but three months past?

WILL. (*nervous*) That play was set in ancient times. It has nothing to do with our current regime.

SIR JOHN. (*pulls out a quarto of King Lear and reads*) "See how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief. Hark, in thine ear: change places, and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief." Whose legal system are you describing there?

WILL. It is a comment on the legal system of ancient Britain.

SIR JOHN. I see. And this passage on the potent power of privilege? "Plate sin with gold/And the strong arm of justice hurtless breaks;/Arm it in rags, a pygmy's straw doth pierce it." Ancient Britain?

WILL. (*afraid*) Do you really believe that crazed old man on the heath was raging at the court of James?

SIR JOHN. Wasn't he? He should have been.

WILL. I do not hold it the proper function of a playwright to call for the overthrow of regimes, no matter how oppressive.

SIR JOHN. Then what is the proper function of the playwright, pray?

WILL. To reconfigure the way we look at the world, to enlighten the ignorant, to extend the imagination.

SIR JOHN. And your chief artistic obligation is—?

WILL. To hold a mirror up to nature.

SIR JOHN. Which makes your writing indistinguishable from milady's looking glass.

WILL. I am a dramatist, Sir John, and dramatists do not take sides. Their characters do. I simply record the discord in blank verse.

SIR JOHN. That is not enough, Will. Our world is in crisis. If playwrights do not quickly join in reforming an evil system, then they, along with all of England, will soon be buried by it.

WILL. I wish to go quietly about what is left of my life as a peaceful man of the theatre.

SIR JOHN. You cannot live in peace when others live in terror. I have not yet defined my own relationship to the persecuted Catholic recusants. But I know I cannot watch a Christian hang in chains while flatterers crawl up the ladder of preferment.

WILL. It was ever so.

SIR JOHN. It was never so like this. If you love your country, then you must begin to tell the truth about it. Otherwise, the squibs that fizzle harmlessly on your stage will start to explode in earnest on the street.

WILL. What are you suggesting? An armed rebellion?
By whom?

SIR JOHN. The Catholic recusants.

WILL. I thought King Jamie had shown tolerance towards Rome.

SIR JOHN. Well, I cannot speak for his Danish Queen, who is rumored to have Papist sympathies. But James, brought up by Presbyterians, calls the Pope the Antichrist, and, like the Puritans, inveighs against the power of witches without believing in saints or miracles.

WILL. I have heard the King described as a devout man.

SIR JOHN. Oh, yes, he is devout—regarding his own godhead. His Majesty's favorite principle is the Divine Right of Kings, which in his case is rather like consecrating a baboon.

WILL. Sir John, forgive me, but we are not going to resolve the future of monarchy or the fate of religion through our debates.

SIR JOHN. I fear this debate will be resolved by hotter heads than ours. Since I obviously cannot move you, I will leave you. Meanwhile, I hope you can live comfortably with your conscience.

WILL. My conscience and I are perfectly compatible these days. And please do not confuse me with my characters. I am a simple law-abiding citizen trying to practice my art in an unsteady world.

SIR JOHN. Well, then, I will persecute you no longer, Will. But do not underestimate the power of your pen.

(SIR JOHN leaves. WILL picks up his quill, looks at it, then throws it down angrily.)

(lights down)

(Lights up on a space in the Whitehall palace. KING JAMES and QUEEN ANNE sit on adjacent thrones like chess pieces, looking forward as they speak. They might as well be in separate countries. JAMES is drinking. Anne is reading a book, perhaps a Quarto of As You Like It. After a moment, he looks up.)

JAMES. Spouse.

ANNE. Your Britannic Divinity.

JAMES. Is it true what they tell me about young Prince Henry?

ANNE. Are we speaking again?

JAMES. Should you lie about this, we will *never* speak again.

ANNE. And your question?

JAMES. Whether the rumor is true that you locked up our twelve-year old son in the bedroom of one of your fleshier waiting women, who initiated him into the Court of Cupid.

ANNE. Who told you this?

JAMES. Why, every courtier knows it. It is the common chatter of the corridor.

ANNE. And does the corridor also chatter about the reason?

JAMES. For what possible reason would a mother, like a common bawd, introduce her male child to the temptations of the flesh?

ANNE. Is this exchange designed to end our estrangement?

JAMES. That estrangement was caused by you.

ANNE. No, by you, when you stole a baby from his mother's arms.

JAMES. You were a frivolous fourteen-year-old when we married, hardly suited to motherhood. You are thirty now, and still unready for that blessed state.

ANNE. You ripped my Henry from my breast at birth.

JAMES. And you reclaimed him through an act of criminal blackmail.

ANNE. Any mother prevented from seeing her own child would resort to desperate measures.

JAMES. Henry is the heir to my throne. He was not meant to be a plaything for a pampered princess.

ANNE. I am his mother.

JAMES. He was returned later to your arms.

ANNE. Five years later, and only after I threatened to return to Denmark.

JAMES. Typifying your willful, forward female nature.

ANNE. I gave you seven children –

JAMES. Four of whom did not survive their infancy. Not to mention your many miscarriages.

ANNE. (*exercised*) And who was to blame for that? My womb or this plague-infested land?

JAMES. You know why we never talk? Because you prefer to shout.

ANNE. I loved you once, James, young as I was. And believe you once loved me.

JAMES. Perhaps I did. That was a very long time ago.

ANNE. So now your affections wander like the moon.

JAMES. What does that mean?

ANNE. Your minions!

JAMES. (*defensive*) I know not what you mean.

ANNE. You have not visited my bedchamber a single night for many years, but your own bed is rarely empty. I could forgive your carnal knowledge of Anne Murray....

JAMES. This is dangerous talk.

ANNE. ...but not your passion for Robert Carr.

JAMES. I feel only friendship for Robert Carr.

ANNE. You express this friendship through a bunghole.

JAMES. What are you saying, accursed woman? That your King is a Sodomite? Sodomy is expressly condemned in Leviticus 18:22.

ANNE. What does Leviticus 18:22 have to say about the secret passage between your bedroom and his?

JAMES. Carr is my trusted advisor. I require continual access to his counsel.

ANNE. At three o'clock in the morning? In your unbuttoned nightgown? The whole court knows how your favorite rules your heart. If I introduced young Henry to the

pleasures of womankind, it was in hope he would not inherit his father's interest in the nether parts of men.

JAMES. Are you questioning the Divine Right of Kings?

ANNE. You invoke Divine Right, but the only divinity you truly worship is your own appetite.

JAMES. I have the power to divorce you, you know.

ANNE. Divorce me then. I am still dreaming of a return to Kronborg.

JAMES. I am a Stuart, not a Tudor. I have no intention of emulating the late Queen's much married father.

ANNE. And I have nothing to say in the matter?

JAMES. *(rising)* Nothing whatsoever. Such are my privileges under the Divine Right of Kings. Now pardon me, my Queen. I have more important state matters at hand than wrangling with a shrew.

(He exits. Anne begins to weep. After a few moments, ROBERT CATESBY, a Catholic nobleman, thirty-two years old, handsome and bearded, steps from the shadows. He and ANNE embrace passionately.)

CATESBY. The royal swine.

ANNE. You heard the king?

CATESBY. The king is no king, rather a lingering disease that calls for remedy.

ANNE. What do you mean?

CATESBY. To cure a diseased limb, they say, it must be chopped off.

ANNE. What is in your mind to provoke such violent imagery?

CATESBY. Question me no more, my dear one, till the deed be done.

ANNE. Tell me or not, I am already implicated.

CATESBY. Let me answer simply thus: I have a plan that would rid this land of despotism, and release us both from pain and torment. England would once again be free to practice its true faith.

ANNE. Are you planning my husband's death?

(CATESBY is silent.)

ANNE. Be advised, I hate this tyrant morning, noon, and night. But I would not have him murdered.

CATESBY. I was thinking more of banishment.

ANNE. To where?

CATESBY. To where you would never see his face again.

ANNE. I have not truly seen his face in sixteen married years.

CATESBY. Then you are agreed?

ANNE. Providing my children be not harmed.

CATESBY. They will be safe from harm.

ANNE. Catesby, you will enjoy neither my love nor my protection, should the slightest danger touch upon my children.

CATESBY. (*taking her in his arms*) You are never to worry. Your children will be safe.

ANNE. (*more urgently*) And Prince Henry will be King. He will not be harmed.

CATESBY. That is our agreement.

ANNE. More than a profession of consent, I want your word of honor.

CATESBY. Insofar as anything is certain, Prince Henry will be King; Elizabeth and your younger son, Charles, will live. You have my sworn word.

(*At this point, WILL walks into the room, surprised to find it occupied by ANNE and CATESBY.*)

CATESBY. And who are you, sirrah?

WILL. William Shakespeare. I beg forgiveness for interrupting your conference. I was told to meet the King in here.

ANNE. Shakespeare, the playwright?

WILL. Himself, your Majesty.

ANNE. I have seen your plays and much admired them.

WILL. I am deeply grateful, your gracious Majesty.

ANNE. Do you know him, Robert? The author of *As You Like It*?

CATESBY. I do not frequent playhouses.

ANNE. You have deprived yourself of much diversion.

WILL. I fear I have interrupted a private conference.

ANNE. No, it is we who are intruding. The King no doubt expects you here. Come, Catebsy. We will finish our business in the antechamber. *(to WILL)* Perhaps we can meet one other day and talk about your plays.

(SHAKESPEARE bows. They exit. WILL looks round the room until KING JAMES enters with his customary bottle and glass. WILL kneels.)

WILL. Your majesty.

JAMES. Get off the floor, Shakespeare. God knows when last they washed it.

WILL. Yes, my liege.

JAMES. Who was that departed with my Queen?

WILL. I know him not, your Majesty.

JAMES. It was Catesby, I warrant, a cat with needle claws. Well, my dear Shakespeare, how are you?

WILL. Very well, your Majesty, and deeply honored by this invitation.

JAMES. A dram of usquebagh? *(He offers WILL a drink.)*

WILL. Why thanks, your Majesty. *(He accepts the glass.)*

JAMES. One of the last remaining legacies of Scotland. *(downing one himself)* I am not a dedicated playgoer, but I have been much taken with your historical chronicles. You seem to have a scholar's appreciation for England's storied past.

WILL. I must confess I occasionally borrow histories from Holinshed.

JAMES. An excellent chronicler. But it is you who give his characters life.

WILL. You flatter me, your Majesty.

JAMES. I do not flatter my subjects.

WILL. No, of course not. Forgive my blunder.

JAMES. But I can reward them. How much do you know of Scottish history?

WILL. I know a bit about the exploits of the Bruce and of the Douglas.

JAMES. No, I mean the history of the Stuart succession.

WILL. Not much, I blush to say, your Majesty.

JAMES. The Scottish warriors, Banquo and his young son Fleance, started a whole line of kings. They are said to have been my ancestors.

WILL. I shall look them up in Holinshed.

JAMES. I want you to do more than look them up. I want you to write a play about them.

WILL. I see.

JAMES. There are some in this kingdom who still question my right to the throne. Your play might settle those doubts. You validated the royal rights of the Tudors for Elizabeth. I want you to do the same for me and the Stuarts.

WILL. (*hesitating*) An extraordinary honor, sir, I...

JAMES. Not an honor, your duty as a loyal servant of the crown.

WILL. I have always considered myself a...

JAMES. You're not a Papist, are you?

WILL. (*reddening*) Why, no, your Majesty. My father was the...

JAMES. Good. And what is your position on satanic witchcraft?

WILL. (*as if coached*) I abhor the practice and all things pertaining to the devil.

JAMES. Are you familiar with my book, *Demonologie*?

WILL. I have heard remarkable things about it, your Majesty, and have every intention of...

JAMES. Read it! Here is a copy, graced with the autograph of a king.

WILL. How can a poor subject ever thank a mighty monarch for such a signal honor?

JAMES. By writing witches into your play. There is too much doubt of their existence among the English, and you must help me teach them otherwise.

WILL. (*doubtfully*) Witches!

JAMES. I could hire your colleague Middleton to be your collaborator. (*WILL is silent.*) Thomas Middleton—the author of *The Witch*.

WILL. I know the man and am of course familiar with his play. I am confident I could handle the more fantastical aspects of the story myself.

JAMES. Fantastical, you say? Do you share the common doubts about these women, too?

WILL. (*hastily*) No, no, they are a bane upon the commonwealth.

JAMES. (*angrily, banging the table*) More than a bane, a sore, a blister, a carbuncle. Ever since Agnes Thompson roused storms to prevent the passage of my Queen from Denmark, I have been the subject of foul conspiracies. Did you know aught of this hag?

WILL. No, sir.

JAMES. She stole a linen cloth of mine, then bound a cat and christened it, tying it to dead parts of men, and threw it into the ocean to raise a tempest. Only my faith saved that ship from evil.

WILL. She confessed this?

JAMES. Of course she confessed it—after being duly persuaded. As additional proof of her evil nature, I, personally, discovered the devil's mark upon her private parts. The statute I passed last year makes it a capital offense to practice witchcraft in this realm, or even to exhume bodies for the sake of sorcery, charm, or enchantment. It's all in the book!

WILL. Yes, sir. And your loyal subjects are deeply grateful for the protection you provide them from these, uh, horrendous harridans.

JAMES. I would hope so. I would hope so. All right. Begin work on your play. And make it short! I abhor long nights at the theatre.

WILL. All sensible men do, your Majesty. I promise you my briefest work.

JAMES. The first performance of which will take place in the palace at Hampton Court. With all my English courtiers in obligatory attendance. How long till such a project reach the stage?

WILL. The actual writing would occupy me for, oh, perhaps half a year. The rehearsal period should be briefer. I believe the Kings Men could have the play prepared for you by next August.

JAMES. Sooner. I am an impatient man. Farewell, Shakespeare. And stop by the Secretary's office on your way out. He has a bag of gold coins there that should speed your enterprise.

WILL. No words can speak my gratitude.

JAMES. Then save them for your play.

(SHAKESPEARE walks out of the King's chambers into his own. He is met there by SIR JOHN HARINGTON, who seems very upset.)

WILL. The man's a menace. We are being ruled by a king whose governing handbook is a manual of sorcery.

SIR JOHN. That's why he's called the wisest fool in Christendom.

WILL. And he wants these witches to control the course of the action, even alter the design of history. Were I to assign such power to otherworldly creatures, every enlightened man in England would laugh me from the room.

SIR JOHN. Starting with me.

WILL. An object of ridicule!

SIR JOHN. You said No to him, of course.

WILL. Say No to a King?

SIR JOHN. You said No to me.

WILL. You are not a King.

SIR JOHN. Regardless, you must reject this assignment.

WILL. I might find a way to fold these creatures into the plot...

SIR JOHN. I seem to remember the purpose of drama was to hold a mirror up to nature.

WILL. These are different circumstances.

SIR JOHN. Because your looking glass is now reflecting the promise of preferment.

WILL. If I refuse the King's request, I could spend my middle age in the Tower, mourning my lost freedom, whereas if I shoveled in some scenes about a few fantastical women I could live out my life in peace and plenty. Writing about witches is hardly a mortal sin.

SIR JOHN. Are you forgetting all those wretched creatures even now being stretched upon the rack or hanging from the gibbet, while the great William Shakespeare labors to turn the King's delusions into deathless verse.

WILL. Sir John, I am by profession a poet and a playwright. My primary ambition is to fashion a good poem – and if possible avoid the rack myself.

SIR JOHN. You are a Kings man now, Will, in every sense of that phrase.

(enter BEN JONSON, followed close upon by MARSTON)

BEN. Hallo, Will.

WILL. Now, now, Ben, no more purgations in this room.

BEN. No, Will, rest easy. Marston here and I are now the best of friends. Aren't we, Jack?

MARSTON. The most bountiful of brethren, the most compatible of companions.

WILL. What astronomical aberration accounts for this sudden change in feeling?

BEN. What else? A commission. Blackfriars has approached the two of us...

MARSTON. Actually, there's three of us.

BEN. ...to write a city comedy for the Children of St. Paul's. Yes, there are three of us. We are collaborating with George Chapman. What a relief to be able to celebrate military courage and manly plain-dealing instead of courtly bowing and scraping.

MARSTON. (*looking admiringly on BEN*) Once again, I am apprenticing the master.

BEN. And sharing his fat commission.

SIR JOHN. Well, that's happy news. Will, on the other hand, has just been commissioned by the King.

MARSTON. By the King!!

BEN. Has he told you yet the subject?

SIR JOHN. A vindication of the Stuart succession beginning with a procession of witches.

BEN. Why didn't he ask me? I know Scotland like the palm of my hand.

MARSTON. And I have comprehensive comprehension of witchcraft.

WILL. The King would like Tom Middleton to help me with the witches.

MARSTON. Let me manufacture the hellish harpies.

WILL. I am the man. And wish I weren't.

BEN. Come now, Will, don't be so punctilious. Royal patrimony is not so plentiful in these days of royal parsimony.

SIR JOHN. And it isn't every day one has the opportunity to flatter a degenerate king.

BEN. Degenerate is not the first word I would use to describe King Jamie. An idiot, yes, overly infatuated with his own meager learning, and easily hoodwinked. But basically your everyday royal dunce.

MARSTON. What's the plot of this play, Will?

BEN. Let him take an oath first not to steal it.

WILL. You know I have difficulty inventing plots. But I've found a few passages in Holinshed about a nobleman who kills his king and establishes an illegitimate claim to the throne.

MARSTON. His name?

WILL. Macbeth.

MARSTON. Sssssh.

WILL. What's the matter?

MARSTON. We don't pronounce those syllables anywhere near a theatre.

WILL. Why?

MARSTON. Nobody knows.

WILL. At all events, one of the nobleman this Mac–

MARSTON. Sssh.

WILL. This *Machiavel* slays is an ancestor of our own King James.

BEN. Name of –?

WILL. Banquo. Father of Fleance, founder of the Stuart line.

MARSTON. And whence come the witches?

WILL. (*picking up Holinshed and reading*) According to Holinshed, this thane Mac –

BEN & MARSTON. Sssssh.

WILL. This nameless Scottish thane and Banquo encounter three women in strange and wild apparel, “resembling creatures of the elder world, nymphs or fairies” who hail him future King of Scotland.

BEN. So in place of your customary ghastly ghosts, you'll now be featuring withered witches?

WILL. That's the challenge – having both. I am thinking of bringing the spirit of Banquo back from the dead to frighten the usurper.

BEN. *Hamlet, revenge!!*

MARSTON. Nymphs and fairies are not witches.

WILL. Holinshed refers to them as “weird sisters.”

MARSTON. I have a weird sister but I wouldn't call her a witch. (*thinks*) Maybe I would.

BEN. Enough with nymphs and witches and Marston's weird relatives, I think our friend has a play here.

WILL. (*encouraged*) I found a later passage in Holinshed regarding another Scottish noble, name of Donwald, who also kills his king. With the help of a wife more murderous than he.

BEN. A regicidal Scot with a homicidal wife. Better and better.

SIR JOHN. Will, I believe you are collecting materials here for a marvelous monument to monomania – therefore one that will doubtless please the King.

WILL. I believe I am developing something more, Sir John, that may please the King without disgracing me.

SIR JOHN. The King is the disgrace, and you will be, too, if you stage this travesty. How do you propose to satisfy at the same time the demands of your patron and the principles of your art?

WILL. Ah. And that, Sir John, remains a mystery, like the prohibition on my hero's name.

BEN & MARSTON. Sssh.

(**SIR JOHN** shakes hands and leaves. The others remain in darkness. On the street, **SIR JOHN** is met by **ROBERT CATESBY**.)

CATESBY. Well-met, Sir John.

SIR JOHN. I hope we are well-met, Catesby. You asked for this meeting, not I. How goes your cause?

CATESBY. It proceeds apace. Any decision yet about joining our movement against this Scottish heretic?

SIR JOHN. You know how strongly I believe in every Christian's right to worship.

CATESBY. I am not interested in toleration. I am interested in change.

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