

**MERELY PLAYERS**

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Synopsis: What if you found out Shakespeare stole your work and passed it off as his own? It's hard to be the bard — especially when you're not actually William Shakespeare, but instead his former mistress, who murdered him for stealing her plays and has assumed his identity as her revenge. Emilia "Lia" Lanier's first day in Shakes' shoes isn't going quite as she expected.

### Cast of Characters

EMILIA “LIA” LANIER: 25-39. A woman writer who penned beloved comedies and dramas under the assumed name (and identity) of William Shakespeare.

NARRATOR: 40-65. A boisterous, troubadour-like male figment of Lia’s imagination, who acts as her (not entirely welcome) co-pilot when writing and navigating the world of Elizabethan theater as a man.

HENRY HUNT: 50-70. Son of Mary Boleyn and the head of court entertainment. One of Shakespeare’s patrons. Can double with the GUARD.

RICHARD BURBAGE: 50-70. Pompous star of several of Shakespeare’s plays at the Globe, including (appropriately) *Richard III*. Brilliant onstage, dim in real life.

GUARD: A knight of the queen’s court, tasked with law enforcement. Gruff and overworked.

MARY FITTON: A maid of honor in Queen Elizabeth’s court. One of Shakespeare’s most enthusiastic mistresses.

## Act I, Scene I

Setting: The interior of “Shakespeare’s” writing chambers. At stage right is a chamber door, or a suggestion thereof. An Elizabethan-style chair sits behind a wooden desk at center stage, upon which are perched a quill, ink, and several discarded pieces of parchment. On the stage left side of the desk is a tudor flat cap hat with a wig and false beard attached to it, which in an unworn state looks like a dead animal.

At Rise: LIA, wearing a man’s collar and cape, sits at the desk writing contentedly by soft candlelight as a gentle lute melody plays. The NARRATOR enters SL in a spotlight, wearing a plumed cap and strumming said lute.

NARRATOR

Here we find at work the mind of an authoress, named Lia.  
Mistress o’ rhythm, rhyme, repetition—even onomatopoeia.  
But listen friends, yes if ye bend, lend, extend your ear:  
You’ll hear they also called her; after a bloke slightly balder;  
That lit’rary Gibraltar....

HENRY  
*(Offstage; yelling)*

SHAKESPEARE!

*(The lute music cuts out sharply as LIA jumps up from her writing, wide-eyed, panicked. After a moment of being frozen:)*

LIA  
*(Yelling:)*

One second!

*(She lunges across the desk, grabbing the cap-wig-beard combo and tugging it over her head.)*

LIA  
All right, you now may enter!

*(HENRY ambles through the SR door. He wears many heavy gold*

*chains.)*

HENRY

Looking well, Bill, hello!  
I reckon, though, your beard's a bit off...

NARRATOR

...-center?

*(LIA glares at the NARRATOR, tugging her false beard back into place. HENRY does not react to the interjection. LIA turns her attention back to HENRY:)*

LIA

*(Laying it on thick)*

I value, always and now, you  
And your honest counsel, my patron and mentor.  
*(Clapping him on the back.)* Thanks, Hen.

HENRY

What is it, then?

*(LIA interlaces her fingers diplomatically.)*

LIA

Ah yes, the reason I've asked you here today.  
Thanks, again, for coming.  
The matter at hand is a brand-new play  
I'm currently up-and-drumming.  
"A Midsummer's Night," it's a comic flight  
Of fancy, romance, lute-strumming...  
But in regards to pay,  
I thought in advance we may,  
-How might one say-

HENRY

Not delay the pesky summing?

*(Lights on HENRY and LIA dim as the NARRATOR interjects once more in spotlight. HENRY exits SR in the darkness, and LIA soft freezes.)*

NARRATOR

Since his original manuscripts have never been located  
Billy's true identity has been heavily debated...  
And add to that the fact in Will's will, no member of his fam...  
Was left one single sonnet, play, or pentameter of iamb!

Perhaps you've heard rumors, malignant as tumors,  
William Shakespeare was an amalgam...  
Of scribes with names less pretty  
Who wrote plays by committee  
About credit, they didn't give a damn.

*(LIA, breaking the soft freeze and entering a flashback, discovers a book hidden beneath the discarded parchment on the desk. She opens it, the cover facing the audience. It reads, in script: Definitely Not Stolen From Lia's Diary, by William Shakespeare. She gasps as she reads.)*

Or more troubling still, the theory that Sir Will  
–Though academia does, discussing it, forbid–  
Lifted prose from one o' his mistresses,  
Although there were no witnesses...  
Well, in *this* tale, he did.

*(LIA slams the book down in rage and rolls up her sleeves. She disappears SL.)*

That is, 'til Lia found him out  
That lying, thieving id!  
Deciding, from the world, the dirty scoundrel should be rid.  
Now, rather than call him out  
And chance being branded an *(Air quotes)* "interloping bitch"  
Ms. Lanier arranged a rather strange happenstance in which...  
The Bard tripped hard and *(Bigger air quotes)* "accidentally fell into a ditch"

*(LIA reappears, SL, looks furtively left and right, then with great effort drags a long, body-sized lump rolled up in a carpet and tied with a rope, with a pair of men's shoes sticking out the far end, across the stage. NARRATOR looks on. She makes it as far as center*

*stage, giving him a death glare look like “A little help here?” before he finally steps in to lift the opposite end while continuing his monologue:)*

So far the plot—though far from taut—had gone off without a hitch:  
She’d haul his breeches on, a wig she’d don...

*(They finish hauling the body off SL, and LIA puts on the shoes.)*

She prayed, and made the switch.

*(The NARRATOR wanders downstage right again, assuming his previous post.)*

And who am I?  
Perhaps you cry!  
Merely one of her imagination’s figments.  
A conscience—no!  
More like a mental bro...  
Who helps her paint in the world of men’s pigments.  
For women-ken, when imitating men,  
Can in the finer details splotch it.  
So on I prattle  
Tto help her ride Western, not side-saddle,  
And ensure she doesn’t botch it.

LIA

Watch it.

*(HENRY re-enters, SR, assuming the same SR position he was in earlier.)*

NARRATOR

And here and now, we’ll see just how  
She fares with Henry Hunt, patron rich;  
For a significant upgrade from what her own plays paid...  
M’Lady makes her pitch:

LIA

For my last show, I was paid half of ha’penny;

And though for farthings, I'm not starving,  
I'd like twice as many.  
For to write more plays, without a raise,  
We'll, they'd be just like the price-flat.  
Twice what they've been paying,  
I wouldn't be nay-ing,  
I'm just saying...  
(*Cockney accent*) It'd be nice, that.

*(HENRY stares at LIA for a long moment, then bursts into a fit of laughter, doubling over and startling both LIA and the NARRATOR. When he recovers, wiping tears from his eyes:)*

HENRY

Oh Billy, you jest!  
That's why you're the best.  
Asking for just more  
Than you'd procure a grain of rice at.  
It must be reverse psychology  
You trying low-ball me;  
When we both know last time I paid you thrice that.

*(Asides, to the audience, separately:)*

LIA

Christ!

NARRATOR

Drat!

HENRY

Yet your work I adore so much, that still  
I'll offer the coffer,  
I'll proffer the till...  
Being as am I, from the courts to the sty  
Your most devoted shill,  
In your artistry, basking,  
Five times what you're asking...  
Would that be overkill?

NARRATOR

Au contraire mon frère;  
For fair is fair...

LIA  
*(Playing it cool)*

I think that'll fit the Bill.

*(HENRY and LIA shake hands, and he exits through the SR door. As soon as he is gone, LIA and the NARRATOR jump up and down excitedly, then execute a running, jumping chest bump at center stage. Then they transition into the secret handshake, and a brief choreographed dance concluding with a dab. As the gentle lute music begins to play again, they take it as their cue, bowing curtsy to each other. LIA returns to the desk and continues writing contentedly as the NARRATOR returns to his SL perch.)*

NARRATOR

How, you might ask, did she accomplish the task  
Of fooling these ignorant suckers?

*(He gestures to LIA's false beard-hat-wig thing, which she only now realizes she's still wearing.)*

In so lowly a disguise as  
What I can only apprise as...  
The hides of several fried woodchuckers?

*(LIA yanks the cap off her head, glaring at the NARRATOR.)*

Then recall that in her day  
Men, all the parts, would play  
Even when they called for a hen's clucker...

RICHARD  
*(Offstage; bellowing)*

SHAKES, YOU BLOODY SNAKE!

In fact, here comes one anon!

*(NARRATOR gestures “hurry up” to LIA, who re-wigs,)*

So she put the thing back on  
*(LIA recognizes RICHARD’s voice)* Just as another interruption...

LIA

*Mother–*

*(As LIA mouths the second half of the word you were expecting her to say:)*

NARRATOR

*(Interjecting quickly to censor her:)*

Struck her!

## **Act I, Scene II**

*(RICHARD bursts through the SR door into the chamber with a dramatic pose:)*

RICHARD

Lark! Do you think I’m dumb as a brick?

LIA

No. Bricks are cleverer by far.

*(RICHARD looks left, looks right, but can’t find LIA sitting behind the desk. He Then spins all the way around, his cape trailing behind him like a dog chasing its tail. In the process, the cape winds up on his face.)*

RICHARD

Hark! How dare you treat your star as though he’s thick?

*(LIA steps downstage from behind the desk just as he removes the*

*cape from his face.)*

LIA

Hello, Dick.

RICHARD

Oh! There you are.

NARRATOR

Find here leading actor, Sir Richard Burbage.  
A peerless enactor of the Bard's dramatic verbage.  
A shape-shifting Proteus, with vocals never faint.  
Rehearsal dodged, he's come to lodge a curious complaint.

RICHARD

Bill! I have come to inform you of a matter that thoroughly me irks.  
Concerning your comedies, tragedies, dramedies, and other assorted works.  
Your Lady MacBeth-y:  
So forceful, not breathy!  
That Beatrice glows with rage!  
Your Viola, cunning;  
Your Portia, quite stunning;  
Your ladies doth the men upstage!  
I've not a real objection—No!  
To their characters' injection—Ho!  
Though! Their scene-stealing does me vex...

LIA

Just as it seems I've no disaffection  
For writing you one-syllable interjections—

RICHARD

Lo! / Writing *them* the best roles is  
A disservice / To your sex!

LIA

Mr. Burbage, I'm sure this would occur  
To someone of your formidable smarts;

But perhaps you didn't know...  
*(Slowly, as to a toddler)* That at *ev'ry single show*  
*Men play all the parts?*

*(RICHARD's jaw drops and he is silent for a long moment.  
Bemused:)*

RICHARD

Even the tarts?

*(LIA raises her left hand and places her right hand over her heart.)*

LIA

On my heart.

RICHARD

Well in that case, it's a sin; a disgrace  
You've not written one with my name upon it!  
My own lady role in which I may extoll  
My feminine side—doggone it!  
Now listen, Shakes, before you make  
One more couplet, or sonnet...

*(LIA begins to nudge RICHARD towards the SR door exit as he  
continues:)*

Write for me a gal of keen rationale...  
*(Suddenly giddy)*—But something I can play in a bonnet!

LIA

I'm on it!

RICHARD

And say, while you're at it...  
I've just about had it  
With collars quite lacking in frill;  
The sleeves of a maid coming to a madman's aid  
May be itchier to act in...

LIA

Or get one's head cracked in...

RICHARD

To have one's poor brain wracked in...But still!  
The time now has come  
For me to stop playing bums  
Though certainly some  
That *you've* written have been worthwhile...

LIA

It will take more than a corset  
– And I can't say I endorse it –  
To feminize *your* dramatic styles...  
So rather than to force it,  
If you could just hold your horse a bit...  
Perhaps a woman actor could lend feminine wiles!

To wit:...Shit!

That must be all she–he!–writ. (*The NARRATOR looks at her sharply.*)  
For I can name no benefactresses  
As we've yet to invent...actresses...

RICHARD

Actresses? More like *hacktresses*.  
What is this nonsense phrase you tout?  
If I didn't know better,  
I would soon wonder whether...  
(*Gasping*) My skills do you doubt?

LIA

(*Recovering*) No, but until my ink's spilled about...  
There's so way that such a play can sprout  
And with no play, no leading lady...

RICHARD

(*Affected*) No Dismayed Fay, or Shady Katie...

LIA

(*Facepalming*) Jesus...

RICHARD  
Who else could make such roles so weighty?

LIA  
I'm blushing.

*(LIA begins steering RICHARD toward the door by his shoulders.  
He does not notice.)*

RICHARD  
No bard works as hard from here to Haiti!

LIA  
I'm not rushing you, but...

RICHARD  
Or thereabout...

LIA  
*(Yelling)*  
GET OUT!

RICHARD  
*(Grabbing his hat and cape)*  
When it's done, you know just who to send for...

LIA  
*(Turning back to her writing desk)*  
I trust you can find the door.

RICHARD  
*(Bowing while heading to the door)*  
Your pardon now I must implore.

LIA  
It won't be granted, I assure...

RICHARD  
*(Screaming)*

I just can't wait to play a WHORE!

*(RICHARD skips out and dramatically slams the door behind him. His cape gets caught. An offstage THUD signals that he has tried to sprint out the door and instead fallen on the floor directly outside of it. LIA watches from the chamber interior as the trapped shred of fabric strains to spring free from the frame. It doesn't. A rip is heard. She turns her attention back to her desk.)*

### **Act I, Scene III**

*(Lute music starts to play again, and LIA continues to write. The NARRATOR wanders to the desk and looks over LIA's shoulder.)*

NARRATOR

It seems with all the day's confusion,  
The annoying, cloying rude intrusions,  
Little *actual* writing has come to pass...

*(LIA slams down her quill in frustration, standing to confront the NARRATOR.)*

LIA

If you don't quit distracting me  
With your twit-narrator-acting, see...  
I'll write you into this play as an ass!

NARRATOR  
*(To the audience)*

Crass!

*(LIA furiously grabs her pen again and scribbles on the page in front of her.)*

LIA

There—say no more!  
To stage left you soar, to trade your fading brow...

NARRATOR

Mistress, is this necessary?

I'd much rather be a fairy—or a dairy cow!

LIA

*(Pointing sharply towards stage left)*

Donkey's head, NOW!

*(The NARRATOR begrudgingly heads to SL to retrieve the head.  
Upon his return:)*

LIA

There, that's much better!  
For now your snout's much wetter;  
And though for fur I much prefer  
That of a spaniel, or a setter...  
Make yourself useful...

NARRATOR  
*(Indignant)*

Have I been not?

LIA  
*(Begrudgingly)*

And help me figure out this plot.

*(The NARRATOR sits on edge of the desk.)*

NARRATOR  
Alright. What seems to be the problem, then?

LIA  
Nothing good will come out of this wretched pen.  
It used to flow freely, up until...

NARRATOR  
'Til when?

LIA  
*(Plopping her face down into the parchment in despair)*  
'Til I started imitating men.

NARRATOR

A common mistake one can make...

LIA

Ya *think*?

What about murdering your ex and stealing his identity?

NARRATOR

*(Pulls out a flask and offers it to her)*

Have a drink.

*(LIA takes a long swig.)*

NARRATOR

Now back to the matter at hand;

The play;

For which you've recently won a handsome sum.

The plot. What is it?

LIA

Yes, the plot, 'tis...it...

Something. It is.

NARRATOR

A real whiz!

Can't even ace her own pop quiz.

LIA

*(Standing defensively)*

I did have one, I swear,

I just forgot!

*(Snapping her fingers)* No, wait! Now I recall.

Two sets of lovers. One wedding ball.

Each loves another.

NARRATOR

*That's it?*

LIA

No, that's not all.

A fairy sends them off the walls.  
Casts a spell to change who loves who.

NARRATOR

I take a donkey's in it, too?

LIA

A weaver turned into a donkey, true!  
For being an annoying shrew!

NARRATOR

And the themes?

LIA

Yes, themes aplenty. More than twenty.

BOTH

That's too many.

LIA

Well, if there are any...

*(She wanders a few feet downstage.)*

Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind;  
And therefore is winged Cupid all too kind.  
The theme is, to ignorance, lovers must be resigned.  
The theme is, love fools you, that's how it's designed.  
The scheme is, love rules you, 'til you wake up and find...

NARRATOR

And therefore is winged Cupid...

BOTH

PAINTED BLIND!!!!!!

*(The NARRATOR and LIA once again transition into secret handshake, but this one is more elaborate, and culminating in the narrator assisting LIA in doing a back handspring. Next, another brief choreographed dance, this time disco-themed. The lute music*

*once again plays them back into reality.)*

LIA

Why is it that we get so lost in love?  
Why couldn't I tell my precious dove, was a thief in sheep's clothing?  
Ne'er to undo my loathing?  
The promise he made me  
To help my plays get produced  
Was but one way he played me  
A promise reduced  
To him stealing my words  
Passing them off as his own...

NARRATOR

He got them produced, alright.  
But for his name alone.

LIA

How foolish was I, so naive and blithe,  
To think a man of letters  
Wouldn't twist such a promise  
By the wrist, high and pompous,  
To his own position better...  
To the letter of the law,  
Not the law's *intent*...  
To think that's who all  
Of London called a gent!

### **Act I, Scene IV**

*(The NARRATOR is suddenly unsettled as footsteps are heard alighting the stairs to Shakespeare's chamber.)*

NARRATOR

Speaking of the law,  
It's best not to let your tongue thaw...

LIA

What?

NARRATOR

The queen's representative has come to call...

*(A furious knocking at the door.)*

LIA

Stall!!!!

GUARD

Open at once for the Royal Guard!

LIA

*(Yelling)*

Just one moment, your grace!  
For I'm not decent!

NARRATOR

Damn right...

LIA

*(Hissing to the narrator)*

What are you doing? Do something!  
Help me!

NARRATOR

Imaginary figments can provide little help, see;  
To recent killers on the lam...

GUARD

Are you decent?

LIA

*(Panicking)*

I am!

*(The door bursts open with such force that it nearly falls off its hinges. A gruff-faced GUARD with a spear enters.)*

GUARD

Master Shakespeare, is it?

*(LIA nods, frightened.)*

I'm from the queen's royal order.  
I was summoned here with my spear to your writing quarters.

LIA

Er, yes, 'tis an honor to receive you here, fair knight.  
To what to owe the pleasure?

NARRATOR

More like, "To what do I owe the fright?"

*(LIA smacks the NARRATOR without breaking eye contact with the GUARD.)*

GUARD

Tell me, "Shakes," not at your leisure:  
Where were you yesterday night?

LIA

Right. I was...out.

GUARD

Out where?

NARRATOR

In the open air...

LIA

Just...taking a leisurely stroll...

GUARD

I see. Can anyone corroborate?

NARRATOR

No one on this side,  
Of the great divide...

I'd...gone out alone. It was late.

LIA

Around nine?

GUARD

Eight. And may I inquire,  
My most respected sire,  
As to the nature of your inquest?

LIA

*(The GUARD laughs heartily.)*

Well if the tip *were* true...  
Then it wouldn't be you  
Who I'd be talking to!

GUARD

Then who?

LIA

Some blasted wretch!

GUARD

Well that's a stretch...

NARRATOR

You see, here, Shakespeare  
We've received a queer anonymous eyewitness tip...  
That while walking through a field  
With a lady well-heeled  
Last night, you got, well...

GUARD

Tripped?

NARRATOR

You slipped.  
And rather than come to your aid,

GUARD

This ingenious maid,  
Simply tied you up, rolled you into a carpet...  
After stripping off your clothes,  
Leaving little but your nose,  
And flung your dead body into a tarpit.

*(LIA starts laughing in an incredibly convincing high-pitched voice.)*

LIA

Master Guard, what a whale of a tale!  
Though I must say I fail  
To understand who could have fathomed such a story!  
For you see, I'm quite alright here;  
All clothes and nose, and so I fear...  
The claim you're chasing is all gore, no allegory.

GUARD

Surely!  
For the yarn's cliches and tropes...  
Are nothing short of hoary!  
But there was just one detail  
I couldn't fail to ignore, see...  
The tarpit bit just doesn't fit.  
Why not fling him in the Thames...

NARRATOR

Because Them's the Thames...

LIA

Or perhaps the old mill quarry?

GUARD

Exactly. For before 'ye sink,  
Like a stone,  
Into the tarpit's stink,  
A dead body is preserved, as in ink;  
A perfect clone of its mortal self...  
As well as any evidence to which we could, its killer, link.

LIA

Fascinating, methinks...

GUARD

And given that you are alive and well,  
I suppose I mustn't the great Bard tell  
That this crime, reliably witnessed, must have claimed a different victim we'll  
discover...

Once we dredge this ghastly tar,  
Seeing as I've come this far:  
You risk perjury to deny that you were walking with your lover?

*(Without breaking the GUARD's confrontational eye contact, LIA  
begins a sidebar with the NARRATOR.)*

LIA

*(To NARRATOR)*

What's the backup plan here?  
We're far from in the clear.

NARRATOR

Why on earth are you asking ME?

LIA

You've been interrupting my every other thought,  
And NOW you've got nothing to decree?  
Help me, I'm pleading; I won't perjure myself...

NARRATOR

You mean Shakespeare. You won't perjure thee?

LIA

Yes, Shakespeare; don't you see?  
If they arrest him, they arrest me, the charade's good as gone.  
As this false beard was NOT made to stay on!  
What would a man do?  
How would he explain?

NARRATOR

*(Sighing)*

Answer that, I can do,  
But it will sound inane.

LIA

Say it plain!

NARRATOR

To explain away a lie, to a fellow guy, of a scenario most outrageous...  
Making it sound as sexual as possible is usually most advantageous.

LIA

Are you insane??

NARRATOR

Be courageous!

LIA

Oh, good sire of the Queen's court;  
I'd previously misspoken.  
I didn't mean to cause any strife.

I was last night the escort of a woman-sort  
Who is not, in fact, my wife.  
But! If my sharing that information ever damaged her reputation,  
I'd be heartbroken the rest of my life.

For you see dear knight,  
For that slipping, tying-up sight,  
I've a simple explanation to relay.

GUARD

Well Billy, let's hear it.

NARRATOR

You're both frighteningly near it...

LIA

Indeed, I shall tell you, if I may.

I will relay it with haste.  
Though I do hope I don't offend your good taste...  
As I wouldn't blame you if you'd scoff.

For you see, as a playwright  
Within the fantasies of what I may write...  
Only make believe really gets me off.

Ever heard of roleplay?

GUARD  
*(Holding up a hand)*

No more need you say.  
Thank god we don't have to dredge the bloody pit...

I appreciate your discretion.

GUARD  
Man to man, you've learned your lesson.  
Next time, keep to the bedroom with your murder kink skit...

*(The GUARD exits through the door shaking his head. His gruff footsteps can be heard pounding on the steps as he descends.)*

### **Act I, Scene V**

*(Softer, lighter treads can be heard ascending the stairs outside the the chamber door.)*

MARY  
*(Offstage, softly)*  
Shakespeare, do I hear thou?

NARRATOR  
Alas; a lass!

LIA  
*(To NARRATOR)*  
Oh, shut up, ass!

*(Toward the door)* Yes, 'tis I, come in!

*(MARY flies through the SR door begins kissing LIA, forcing her up onto the desk. In shock, LIA at first resists, but quickly joins in.)*

NARRATOR

And sitting there, within somewhere between a second and...

*(The NARRATOR looks at his wristwatch)*

*Deux min*

Lia, with speed, reckoned that indeed, she was the...

*(LIA pulls away from the kiss:)*

LIA

*(To the audience)*

*Other other woman...*

*(LIA and MARY resume kissing as:)*

NARRATOR

I've no excuse to not introduce *this* visitor: Mary Fitton...  
It falls quite short to call her the court's "resident sex kitten";

*(He circles the pair, inspecting:)*

Far from a bore, she had a back–*(Notes MARY's backside)*–story!  
That was sorely underwritten.  
Needless to say, 'til Lia had her way...  
Old Billy Shakes was smitten.

*(MARY finally comes up for air and wacks LIA squarely on the chest, causing LIA to double over, clutching her chest in pain, as MARY says:)*

MARY

Billy, you sod, I could wring your neck!

For standing me up last night!  
No message, you clod? I started to suspect  
You'd perished in some garish fight!

NARRATOR

Quite right!

LIA

*(Still hunched over and recovering from the blow:)*

You couldn't possibly understand, Madame  
At this particular moment just how sorry I am...  
In your debt am I; Tell me, what ever could I do?  
To try and make it up to you?

*(MARY starts kissing LIA again and the NARRATOR begins to inch closer to whisper in LIA's ear.)*

NARRATOR

Though now we find our authoress, presently, besotted  
There is one simple fact she's evidently...forgotted;  
While the beard, the wig, the hat, the digs were enough, to other Britons, fool;  
In Ms. Fitton's view—which we'll learn in a few—Lia may be missing a crucial...

*(The NARRATOR discretely holds the lute vertically at crotch height:)*

...Tool.

LIA

*(To NARRATOR)*

Don't ruin this for me.

NARRATOR

*(To LIA:)*

You're going to need a story.

*(LIA breaks from MARY's embrace once more and wanders downstage.)*

LIA

*(Improvising:)*

There is something about last night that now I must you tell.  
While cutting through a thorny field I accidentally–tripped, and fell.  
The gory details I’ll spare  
But let’s just say that there’s  
Been a change of circumstance...  
In the *nether* compartment...  
In the department of...pants.

MARY

*(Moving closer to LIA with each line:)*

Oh, you poor, thing!  
But let me be reassuring: It alters my affections not.  
For have you not still  
A hand with fingers, to clutch your quill  
And touch other, tougher spots?

Have you not a mouth–thine  
With which to anoint mine  
As well as other fine points further South?

*(LIA is momentarily dumbfounded by her luck. Then quickly:)*

LIA

Yeah, that’ll work!

*(MARY laughs, shoving LIA playfully, then heading for the SR door:)*

MARY

You jerk! Right, then. Meet me at ten. And this time, “Prince of Rhyme,” try not to fall again?

*(LIA grins as MARY exits SR. Blackout.)*

## **Act I, Scene VI**

*(Lights up on BURBAGE, center stage, wearing a fairy crown. He is spotlit, test driving LIA’s latest pages from A Midsummer’s Night Dream, specifically, a draft of Titania’s monologue in response to Oberon’s accusations of her infidelity.)*

BURBAGE (as TITANIA)

These are the forgeries of jealousy, indeed:  
And never, since the middle summer's spring,  
Met we on hill, in dale, forest or mead,  
By paved fountain, or by rushy brook-type thing...

*(Lights up stage left, which are just bright enough to reveal the NARRATOR and LIA sitting at her desk, taking notes while they watch Richard.)*

NARRATOR  
*(Aside, to LIA)*

“Rushy brook-type thing?”

LIA

Shit...

NARRATOR

It doesn't quite...sing...

LIA

Should I drop it? I could.

NARRATOR

Let's workshop it.

LIA

Yes, good...

*(LIA waves her hand, signaling to BURBAGE to continue.)*

BURBAGE

Or in the beached margent of the sea,  
To dance our ringlets to the whistling wind with glee,  
But with thy brawls thou hast disturb'd our sport

Creating enmity of the worst sort!

Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain demand,  
As in revenge, have suck'd up from the sea  
Contagious fogs; which falling in the land  
Have every pelting river made so proud and free

That they have overborne their contents...

NARRATOR

Don't you mean "continents"?

LIA

*(Dismissing him with a wave)*

Nonsense...

BURBAGE

The ox hath therefore stretch'd his yoke in vain,  
The ploughman lost his sweat, and the green corn, hence,  
Hath rotted ere his youth attain'd a stain;

NARRATOR

Attain'd a *stain*?  
Aren't we gilding the rhyming lily?

LIA

You're such a pain!  
But yes, that one is silly.  
*(Yelling)* Burbage?

NARRATOR

Shakespeare?  
That last line felt weird.

LIA

I agree, I fear.  
Make that “stain” into a “beard.”

BURBAGE

The ox hath therefore stretch'd his yoke, unsteered,  
The ploughman lost his sweat, and the green corn, hence,  
Hath rotted ere his youth attain'd a beard;

The fold stands empty in the drowned field,  
And crows are fatted with the murrion flock;  
The nine-men's-morris is fill'd up with mud, impossible to wield,

And the quaint mazes in the wanton green  
For lack of tread are undistinguishable, unseen.

The human mortals want their winter cheer:  
No night is now with hymn or carol blest.  
Therefore the moon, the governess of floods here,  
Pale in her anger, washes all the air, in a quest

That rheumatic diseases do abound:  
And through this distemperature we see  
The seasons alter: hoary-headed frosts, all around,  
Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose, ignoring its plea;

And on old Hiems' thin and icy crown,  
An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds, in colors that range,  
Is, as in mockery, set; the spring in sheath, the summer a gown,  
The childing autumn's cloak, winter's robe, change

Their wonted liveries; and the mazed world,  
By their increase, now knows not which is which.  
And this same progeny of evils comes hurled

From our debate, from our dissension;  
We are their parents and original.

*(BURBAGE bows as LIA and the NARRATOR politely applaud.)*

BURBAGE

Billy, you've done it!  
Titania's the one.  
In a role with such soul  
I am sure to stun!

So forceful, tempestuous  
Yet grounded and sure  
She embodies all a woman's qualities  
Any man could look for.

NARRATOR

And it doesn't hurt that she is lord  
Of all the faery world, you may rest assured.

LIA

Richard, I thank you for your kind words  
On the part.  
But I've some thoughts on your interp  
You surely should know.  
Have you a quill and parchment nearby?  
Shall we give it a go?

BURBAGE

I beg your pardon, sir.  
But what precisely do you mean by "thoughts?"

LIA

I mean notes, as it were.

BURBAGE

Err...

NARRATOR  
(Aside, to LIA)

Actors aren't used to getting what you'd call...  
"Notes," from the writer, you'll find.

*(LIA lets out a loud exhale.)*

LIA

Thank you Richard, t'will be all.  
Which is to say...never mind.

*(She dismisses BURBAGE with a quick wave of her hand. He exits through the chamber door. As soon as it closes behind him, her head sinks onto the desk and she lets out a groan.)*

LIA

T'isn't ready, you know!  
And won't be in time for opening night.

NARRATOR

I won't disagree,  
It's plain to see you're right.  
What now?

LIA

For now...I bow.

*(LIA shrugs, then stands from the desk.)*

LIA

To my date with Ms. Fitton I must alight.  
If I must act the part, then in a man's dalliances I surely must also delight.

And any man would be substantially foolish to refuse  
The inspiring, beguiling company of such a muse!

*(LIA then begins grooming herself for the date, then exits as the lights dim and the setting changes to the interior of a darkened, intimate tavern. A table set for two is brought to center stage. The NARRATOR is now a troubadour in the corner of the restaurant, crooning to set the romantic tone for the evening.)*

*LIA re-enters and sits, tapping her foot anxiously and messing with her cap-beard-wig. A few moments later, MARY enters from the opposite side of the stage, dressed in a satin eggplant gown. Half of her curls are pinned up, decorated with sprigs of lavender, with some tendrils springing free. LIA stands as MARY enters, flustered. Simultaneously, in succession:)*

MARY  
Hello.

LIA  
Mary...

*(Now both are flustered; apologizing:)*

I beg your pardon...

Sorry!

Oh you needn't be, no!

It's just that you look so...

How well you look, though!

NARRATOR

Yes yes, you're *both* pretty...

LIA

*(Not breaking eye contact with MARY)*

It's a nice place, you'll find, even if the...

*(Death glare in the direction of the NARRATOR) entertainment's shitty.*

MARY

*(Not getting it but playing along)*

Yes, 'tis a pity. But I need no divertissement when with thee.

*(MARY and LIA get stuck gazing into each other's eyes as the NARRATOR stops playing in delight at MARY's retort.)*

NARRATOR  
(To the audience)

Pithy!

*(The NARRATOR then coughs and gestures with his head towards MARY's chair. LIA snaps to attention and remembers her "manners," crossing behind the table and pulling out MARY's chair. She gestures for MARY to be seated.)*

LIA

Please, sit with me.

NARRATOR  
*(Singing in a Troubadour ballad style)*

Mary had a little plan  
Though small, it soon would grow  
And everywhere that Mary went  
Her plan was sure to follow...

MARY

Will, how it thrills me;  
I can't say how pleased  
I am to sit across from you;  
My anxiety decreased.  
When the night before this morning, without warning  
I thought you worse than deceased...

LIA

Thankfully, the injury needed neither coroner, nor priest...

*(LIA shrugs facetiously.)*

I'm merely sick in the head, like they've always said...

*(LIA lifts her wine goblet to toast MARY, who lifts her own in turn.)*

...Only slightly diseased.

*(MARY smirks. They clink glasses. Then MARY sits up straight and clears her throat.)*

MARY

Enough with the joking!  
I must get it out.  
Will, there's still something else  
I've come here to talk about.

*(She opens her silken satchel to reveal a collection of parchment tied into a roll. She hands it across the table to LIA, who gingerly inspects it.)*

NARRATOR  
*(Singing)*

Mary, Mary  
Quite contrary  
To the expectations of the commissary  
For she thought them ancillary  
To her plan, grand and literary...

MARY

To a degree of deceit, I must now confess.  
Know, though, it doesn't mean I love you any less.  
And though I haven't at any point been under duress...

*(LIA has unrolled the scroll and reads the title aloud.)*

LIA

"The Tragedy of the Lady of Inverness"  
Written by...Mary Fitton?

MARY  
*(Sheepishly)*

Why, yes. I guess.  
I'm but an amateur, I must stress.

LIA  
The amateur's only crime is love. And inexperience.

MARY

I've been hoping, and moping,  
Since you and I met;  
For an op'ning, to ask you...  
I feel I still haven't found it yet...  
If the master of drama that you are might let  
Me request your reading and opinion  
Of my humble play-pamphlet.

*(LIA sits in stunned silence.)*

NARRATOR

It's all so familiar  
It's all not-so-strange  
For 'tis a situation Lia  
Once herself did arrange

A simple ask, a plea  
Of the reigning bard...  
Yet tinged with false humility  
Because—*what, like it's hard?*

She knew she had talent  
She knew she had style  
Under candlelight, her plays  
Passed with a trusting smile...

Once he'd read them, it started  
The unadulterated theft  
Passed off her stories as his own, cold-hearted  
Until none were left

How many lovers, she wondered  
Had played straight into his hand?  
How many others had blundered  
Starstruck by his pen's command?

LIA

You needn't my opinion.

MARY

What? It's all I'm seeking, please.

LIA

It's wrong to seek approval from those no more skilled than...fleas.

MARY

False modesty afflicts you!

LIA

I assure you, more pressing conflicts do.  
Just as the flea's opportunity  
Is in the fruit, or the flesh, left to rot,  
The writer's task is to poke the detritus and ask,  
"Is this *something*, or is this not?"  
No different from vultures, save for quill in place of beak...  
On another writer's poaching I'm not qualified to speak.

NARRATOR

That's bleak.

MARY

Is mocking my ambition with derision what you seek?  
Please tell me your tongue has been lodged in your cheek!

LIA

What I'm saying is this: All writing is theft.

MARY  
(Tearily)

If you refuse to read it, I'll be bereft.

(LIA realizes she has gone too far, and looks up at MARY.)

LIA

Fair lady, forgive me.  
Believe me, I know.  
What is it to have talent  
But no credits to show.

What it is to watch others  
Put on stage, for all to see,  
Your perspective, subjective,  
Yet it's wrong, objectively.

To have something to say  
To have insights to share  
To have anger to scream  
So the others beware.

Yet be forced to watch others  
Put on stage, for all to see,  
Your perspective, subjective,  
Yet it's wrong, objectively.

MARY

The Globe is your playground,  
Yet how well you understand me...

*(LIA snaps suddenly.)*

LIA

I have an idea  
Perhaps it won't fly,  
But I'd regret it more  
If I didn't once try...

If we wrote one, together,  
I mean, you and I...  
Both our names, and your cleverness...

I'm sure that would get it--

MARY

You haven't read it--

LIA

No matter, see...

MARY

Don't flatter me...

LIA

Fair lady, you are brilliance incarnate  
Therefore  
So too will be every new play of yours

MARY

Damn right you are, of course  
It's a tour de force...

LIA

Fine, it's settled  
Together we'll pen a new play  
But for today,  
I must make another request again  
For the thing that currently, most, me ails...

MARY

Which would entail...?

LIA

Come with me to a premiere of a play that's destined to fail?

*(MARY laughs.)*

MARY

Fail? Not the bard...  
I'm sure it's great, you needn't diminish it...

LIA

Well it *could* be good, except...  
*(Whispering)* I've forgotten to finish it

*(They burst out giggling together.)*

MARY

*(Still giggling)*

But what of the actors, who don't know the end???

LIA

Yes, their situation is *grave*...  
But I'll guess I'll just say it's a...new trend  
We'll call it...“improv”!

*(They burst out giggling again. Then LIA takes MARY's hand and escorts her from the restaurant. The scene transitions to the interior of the Globe, where they sit to watch the first preview of “Midsummer Night's Dream.” The NARRATOR reappears as an usher.)*

NARRATOR

In spite of all the gender-bending upending his plays  
Some may struggle still to see old Will as a “she” these days...  
Yet authors often leave hints, allusions; hidden, written layers;  
To delight, engage, spite, enrage and bait fans *and* naysayers.  
So at our story's final page, then, what were, pray, hers?

LIA

*(Looping her arm around the back of MARY's seat:)*  
All the world's a stage, and all the men and women...  
  
*(As she slicks back her beard and wig and smoulders toward the audience:)*

Merely players.

**END OF PLAY.**