WILL SHAKSPERE SPEAKS...

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I am not only witty in myself, the Old Man once had me say, but the cause of wit in other men - or something like that. You probably recognised it. It wasn't me exactly; it was the fat old rogue Falstaff, everyone's favourite, who said it on the stage. But it was me as well. I'm not a fool, no more than Jack Falstaff is. I did notice the similarities. They probably thought I'd be too flattered to care, and in a way they were right. Except it wasn't exactly vanity I felt when I first saw those glorious tumbling phrases written in that courtly hand of his - more a kind of fascination, a wonderment.

And it's true, I am - the cause of wit in other men, I mean - or I was then. It was me that got them moving, got them organised, gave them projects, gave them something to live on from day to day. It wasn't always glamorous but it was an income and it was safe - well, safer than most ways for scholars to get an income in London, as the Old Man knew better than most. No reckonings in little rooms for my people. All they had to fear from me were some gentle reminders if they forgot their obligations, as poets will. Some of them didn't make it anyway - poor Tom Nashe has been a-cold these fifteen years. We fell out, of course. And that libelling scoundrel Greene with his 'upstart crow' and his 'Shake-scene' has been gone even longer than that. I did what I could for both of them, even Greene, though if he'd lived a few days longer he'd have had some burns and bruises to add to his ailments.

Mind you, by 'cause of wit' he might just have meant that I was the butt of other men's jokes, and that was also true. Strange, isn't it, the way his lines will sometimes do that? They're like those clever pictures they paint in the Low Countries - perspective pictures they call them - where you can see different things from different angles. I used to memorise whole speeches of his just so I could roll them around in my mind and on my tongue during those interminable rides from London to Stratford, and then back again when life with pious Anne and the squalling children became too much to bear. Thank the Lord for the not-so-pious Mistress Anne Davenant at the Cross-Keys tavern in Oxford.

I could have been one of the great actors, I've always said that - an Alleyn or a Burbage. Well no, I didn't really have the voice for it. My voice was never soft, gentle and low (an excellent thing in woman), but on the other hand it didn't have the sheer volume of the ranting Alleyn or Burbage's rich variety. I had the memory for it, though - capacious - and I put myself on the stage a few times before the old Queen died and acquitted myself well enough. I played the Ghost once or twice in *Hamlet*. And a most instant tetter barked about, most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust, all my smooth body. Mmm, those words! You can almost chew them! But no, acting wasn't really my game - I had bigger fish to fry, investments you wouldn't want to know about. But I do envy them, the great actors, getting

up there day after day and spouting those mouth-filling lines for a living. There are worse occupations.

Ah, the theatre! Here in Stratford where, to put it mildly, there isn't much going on most of the time, a visit by the travelling players was not something you'd miss. My Lord of Leicester's Men came by when I was and a little tiny boy, with heigh ho the wind and the rain. I suppose it must have been worth their while because a couple of years later my Lord of Warwick's Men and my Lord of Worcester's Men both put on performances there too. We were on the circuit. After that they built the two big playhouses in Shoreditch on the northern edge of London, and that was the end of the touring for a few years. If you wanted theatre you went to London; it wasn't going to come to you. So I did.

I came to London about a year after the twins were born. It wasn't quite a free choice in the end. I'd been caught in the act - of poaching, I mean - a fat young buck on the local squire's estate, Sir Thomas Lucy's, a ceremonious old villain if ever there was one. He'd had his eye on me for years, or so he said, and I believe him. He'd been that way towards my father before me, poor old John. Unsavoury ruffians the Shaksperes as far as the squire was concerned, the kind who'd bring the whole town into disrepute.

It didn't help matters that his gamekeeper found me delivering a stirring battle oration for the neighbours' benefit, much in King Cambyses' vein, as I butchered the carcase in the courtyard behind the house. And then I suppose I stirred the pot when I lampooned Sir Thomas and his prim lady - rather clever, I thought - and showed it to some of the wrong people. When he heard about it he promised to have me horsewhipped, said he'd do it himself. He wouldn't have, but he had people to do it for him, an arrangement I later came to understand and admire. Anyway, it was time for me to make a move.

So I abandoned poor old Anne. She hath a way about her, I suppose. (Did you like that one? She used to.) But she'd become too long in the tooth and lean in the shanks for my taste even then, and not without a touch of the shrew, which she kindly passed on to her younger daughter. Anne hadn't had her way with me for a good six months when I took off. She knew that part of it was over; we both did. I told her I'd come back a rich man one day and buy her the biggest house in Stratford, and I very nearly did. New Place is the second biggest. She was happy enough with that and a steady income. As far as I know she still is, and why wouldn't she be?

I didn't much like leaving the young ones, but I was doing them no good in Stratford. I had a daughter, you know, Susannah, and then a couple of years later twins, a boy and a girl. Poor Hamnet. I named him after a neighbour of mine I used to drink with, Hamnet Sadler who was the boy's godfather. Funny how that name, or something pretty close to it, became everyone's favourite revenger a few years later. He's been dead now for a dozen years or more - my Hamnet, I mean. Only ten years old he was. I had hopes for that boy - what father doesn't? Though to be honest I didn't see much of him once I'd found my feet in London; two or three times perhaps. Well, I couldn't be back and forth continually - I had a business to run, several in fact. So the news was a shock.

It was the plague. The boy was dead in three days from his first cough, and three bad days they were for all of us, me especially. I was sorry he had to die. If the Lord needed one of the twins back - and I suppose twins are a kind of overpayment - I could wish it had been his sluttish sister Judith. She and that snivelling Quiney, her new husband and old paramour, have brought more disgrace on this family than all old John's dunghills put together. I'd have been happy enough to be left with my clever Susannah.

They say she inherits my wit. Perhaps she does. She can certainly extemporise a bit of a rhyme for an occasion, and that was always my forte. And now she's married a doctor in the town, very respectable indeed, with a proper library. He doesn't altogether approve of me, the worthy John Hall - doesn't much like the idea of a father-in-law who made his pile in the

theatre - a dirty immoral business apparently! My God, if he knew where some of the money came from she'd never hear the end of it.

The Old Man knew about it, the poet of the 'silent name' as the foulmouthed young Marston called him, our self-appointed scourge of villainy. 'Most, most of me beloved', he called him, and he meant it too, though he didn't know him as well as I did. According to Marston he was the diamond in the Esculine muck, the star in the Cimmerian darkness, the virtuous spring in the Cynaedian filth of London: all Marston's phrases those, marching like soldados of our warlike age, yet puffy as Dutch hose they are within. As he said himself.

A strange, sputtering, gingery little man, that one, burning with lust and anger and self-hatred. His mother was a smouldering little Italian with a connection to the Earls of Oxford, and the father was a Reader in law at the Middle Temple. They lived there, the three of them, until John got himself married and then ordained a few years ago. It was time he left London. He had no more plays in him, couldn't even finish his last effort, a nasty little melodrama about a sex-crazed countess - yet another sex-crazed countess. I had to get one of our grown-up boy actors, Willy Barksted, to write an ending for it, but it was a waste of my money.

Marston had been trying to catch himself a patron for years, and finally he was able to trade on his mother's connections for a commission to write a wedding masque of sorts for the Huntingdons of Ashby de la Zouch. It was the bride's mother, the old Dowager Countess Alice, Lord Strange's widow, that he had in his sights; but she's past her patronising days. So nothing came of it, and Doll Soare tells me Jack had been resorting to the little white houses near Paris Garden more than was good for his health. Better to marry than burn, St Paul says, but I'm afraid our redheaded young friend may have done both, and his new wife Mary will do likewise in the fullness of time.

Marston's stuff was an odd mix of the garret and the gutter. It was learned, but the learning was ill-digested, like Jonson at his worst. George Chapman did it better, and Sam Daniel: their learning didn't come spewing forth in great gobbets. It had a natural flow to it, though with George the stream was a bit thick and cloudy at times. But no-one could match the Old Man at that. He gave those actors speeches that made them sound as if they were born learned, as if they'd sucked in a lifetime's study with their mother's milk.

Where was I? Yes, my sources of income, public and not-so-public. Always happy to talk about those - well, up to a point. Ben Jonson described one of them pretty accurately in one of his nastier epigrams. I bought up old playscripts from the theatre companies, things they'd got all the mileage out of they were going to - not much in some cases - then added a bit of plot extender here, a bit of comic business there, a couple of extra scenes and a few roaring speeches, and hey presto! we had a new play ready to be sold back to the company for a profit. Very neat. Actually, it wasn't quite so straightforward. I tried to do the treatment myself a couple of times - bombast out a blank verse or two on my own account - but it didn't work. I can do a joke, get a belly-laugh as well as the next man - better than some - I can even turn a clever rhyme. But I can't elevate a passion, I can't bring tears to every eye in the playhouse, I can't astonish people with the power of my words - that I certainly can't do! And I can't make a person come to life on the stage, to stand there and talk as if he's standing and talking in Verona. For all of that you need - I needed - a poet and a scholar, but also someone who knew about war, about the sea, about foreign courts and cities, all the things the old plays were about, and more. And before too long at all I got one - the Old Man himself, shy as a virgin, out of favour and out of funds.

Of course there's my part-ownership in the new Southwark theatre, the Globe, and my share in the Chamberlain's Men. I extracted both from Burbage in '98 in exchange for the props, costumes and playbooks I was able to salvage when Pembroke's Men went under after the *Isle of Dogs* disaster. Those have been pumping along nicely for years, but you couldn't live on them. I couldn't anyway.

Well, not to be coy about it, a fair portion of my wealth has always come from interest on loans - usury if you want to call it that, which I don't. Four years or so, no more, after I came to London I was able to start lending money, and I've lent to all and sundry ever since. It's a great leveller, the need for funds: knights, courtiers, actors, playwrights - even the occasional young earl can find himself a bit short of ready cash when it counts. Whatever the bishops say, it's a service like any other, and my rates were legal and reasonable; God knows *I'm* no Shylock!

Now there was an irony if you like. Shakspere the moneylender, scourge of the moneylenders! That was rich! The old man was very down on usury, thought it undermined English civilisation, sapped the nation's soul. Well, he'd been on the receiving end - which is the interest-paying end - of a lot of big loans in his time. In fact when he made that marvellous play for me about the Venetian merchant and the Jew he'd worked it up from one of his own interludes of twenty years ago. I must say I couldn't see much difference between what I was doing - charging people a fee for spending my money - and what he was doing for years, which was searching out concealed tax debts, recovering them, and keeping a percentage. Either way you're making money (or not, in his case) out of what people don't want to pay. He wanted to believe there was a difference, but he didn't, and there's not.

But it's a thankless business, moneylending. He was right about that at least. Neither a borrower nor a lender be, he wrote - all very well, but most people can't avoid being one or the other. It's the way of the world, and if he'd ever come to terms with it he might have died a happier man. Anyway, I've been moving more into property and commodities lately. The returns are smaller, but they're steadier, and you don't make the lifelong enemies. Now that I'm back in Stratford to stay I need a bit of neighbourly goodwill to oil the wheels of commerce, and just to pass the time of day. I may not have many days left.

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