

BURBAGE. A life of ages and pages.

Pause. Henry looks at his ring.

HENRY. I miss him. Three years gone and I miss Will every day.

JOHN. Aye. He'd know what to say to shut up all our bleating.

BURBAGE. To Will.

Who bequeathed us three these rings to remind us that good friends are behind all good stories. And good stories make for good lives.

JOHN.	HENRY.	ALICE.
To Will.	Hear, hear.	That I like

16-18 A lovely moment...

That is soon destroyed when Boy Hamlet stands on a table as the gathered crowd cheers and starts clapping for the boy to do a speech.

CROWD.	BOY HAMLET.
Speech! Speech! Speech!	Yes, yes. Thank you, yes!

BURBAGE. *(Making a fist with his ringed hand.)* Or perhaps Will just meant us to leave a mark.

ALICE. Oh dear.

HENRY.	JOHN.	ALICE.
Burbage, let's not.	What's the point, Burbage.	Damn it, Richard, believe.

→ BOY HAMLET. "Alas poor Yorick —"

*Burbage rises on the table — cuts the boy off.
He is a lion of a man and throws his ire at the Boy Hamlet.*

BURBAGE. YOU. BOY. Speak not that speech, I pray you.
Mine ears repel the broken lines you claim as Shakespeare.

BOY HAMLET. I claim it not, Master Burbage. I only play the part as written.

BURBAGE. IT WAS NOT WRITTEN FOR YOU.
Those lines are not Shakespeare's and not yours. And Hamlet does not flinch at death, nay he leans into it, he examines, he defies, he does not, as you did today, fall to his knees and whine about it.

The crowd laughs at this.

You deserve the crown more than you deserve that play.

BOY HAMLET. You misunderstand me, Master Burbage. I defer to you, sir. I hope in my old age I will be as well seasoned.

BURBAGE. I'M NOT A GODDAMNED SOUP, YOU ARTLESS MINNOW.

ALICE. Time to go, young man.

HENRY. This is the house of the King's Men, and we have seen enough of you today.

BARMAN. You know I just saw you play Polonius last week, Condell. Had a good cheer when they poked you to death.

BARMAN 2. Finally shut him up.

HENRY. Oh, you think you're being funny?

BARMAN 2. Oh, not as f-f-funny as it was watching Johnny all those years ago.

BARMAN. I do miss the crackling of old St-St-Stuttering Heminges.

HENRY.	ALICE.
That is <i>not</i> this good man's name.	Hey now, none of that in here.

JOHN. Leave it, Henry.

BARMAN. No wonder they moved him to m-m-management.

HENRY. OUT OF HERE OR A BROKEN JAW FOR BOTH.

JOHN. *(Getting upset, which triggers his stutter.)* Just l-l-leave it, I said, leave it.

*The barmen explode into laughter and mock John's stutter.
Alice smacks her hand on the table, shutting them up.*

ALICE. This is Master John Heminges' Tap House next to the Globe Theatre on the boards of which he made *real men, gentlemen, kings, and queens* laugh with wit and wisdom and the soul of the ages, while you were trying to think of a comeback to the cheap whore who wouldn't have you. So unless you want to feel even more like the desperate asses you are, you'll learn from these gentlemen players, steal better, and go *drink by your own playhouse, not ours.*

The bar cheers for her.

JOHN. *(To Alice.)* Never tell your brothers but you are my favorite. ←
Burbage quiets them.

ALICE, BOY HAMLET, BURBAGE

→ *Back to Henry and Elizabeth.*

HENRY. Now that we *can* do this, we must! If we do not, who will?

ELIZABETH. Oh please, darling, I'm not dissuading you, I think the book is a fine idea and a brilliant tribute. But you need to watch the money. We want to be *investing* in this book, not donating.

HENRY. We'll work out the deal when we have the partners. Right now we drink!

ELIZABETH. You need to think of it now. And I will not have you do all this work for nothing.

HENRY. It's not nothing, it's pride, it's love, it's not about profit.

ELIZABETH. Henry. There no such thing as a business that's non-profit. Now before you sign any papers let me read them, I want a return and a percentage of the earnings.

HENRY. I love it when you talk business.

ELIZABETH. I know you do.

HENRY. I get swept away with the heart of a thing.

ELIZABETH. I know you do.

HENRY. And now I need to kiss my beautiful wife.

ELIZABETH. Nothing in your way that I see. ←

He chases her off.

Back to John and Rebecca.

REBECCA. All right. Yes. This is mostly absurd and rather improbable, and you're not even publishers.

JOHN. Exactly.

REBECCA. And the project is enormous and costly and it is all on your head because this theatre has come to depend on you for its very life.

JOHN. Yes. Yes.

REBECCA. But not its art.

This stops John.

You gave up the stage, the stage you loved, the stage that made you and made you alive, to make the King's Men great, and they are, *you* are. That's why you have to do this. That book is...it's *you*. Those

plays are you at your best. You gave up what you loved once, I won't let you do it again.

JOHN. I've already put my life into this theatre, I don't know if I can put the rest into a book.

REBECCA. A theatre is an empty thing. A theatre you fill up. With words.

Alice enters.

ALICE. Dad. We need to talk about this.

JOHN. Ali, not now.

ALICE. Dad, this book is—

JOHN. I know what it is, and I know what it's not. Half the country can't read, the other half can't pay, the paper alone is worth the whole theatre, and I'm not bankrupting the King's Men for this.

ALICE. There's a way.

REBECCA. There must be.

JOHN. *There's not, I'm telling you there's not.*

I'm sorry. I'm tired, Becky.

REBECCA. So am I. I'm tired too, I'm tired after *my* long days, and I know my lines aren't grand ones, "apples, pears, figs, and nuts," but I say them every day, on cue, with no applause. Because not everyone doing good work gets applause. And not everyone gets the chance at a legacy.

JOHN. Is a legacy worth a life?

REBECCA. You're damn right it is.

ALICE. Dad, I can help more if that would—

JOHN. I've tried, I've tried, I've given it too much already and I'm done.

REBECCA. *Dammit John that book is mine too.* Those plays are mine and Ali's and your sons', and I should tell you to abandon this thing just so I can have you at home, so your children can have you, you know the little people who sleep here at night.

JOHN. Becky, please—

REBECCA. I should tell you to drop this whole thing because that would make *my* life better and probably yours. But those plays are not yours and not Will's and not Burbage's, no, they're ours and if

HENRY / ELIZABETH

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they are lost to time, I'm sorry my love, but that will be on your head. So you *will* do it. Yes you will.

JOHN. *All right, women, all right.*

Beat.

ALICE. Why don't you come to the playhouse tomorrow, Mum? I'll take care of things here, come see a play, have some fun.

Rebecca stops. Tentatively she asks...

REBECCA. What's on? A comedy?

ALICE. Actually it is, and Henry's in it. He's not bad.

REBECCA. *(Thinks.)* Maybe next week. *(To John.)* Would it were you, I'd go. I'd always go see you.

She smiles at her daughter, and husband. Breathes, and heads to bed. John and Alice share a look as we... Transition.

Nine.

John, Alice, Henry in the Globe Tap House...

HENRY. Wait a minute, wait, not one printer on Fleet Street is willing?

JOHN. I went to everyone. They all say they can't print such a large project. I even said we had the money.

ALICE. Do we?

JOHN. Of course not.

ALICE. Well it has to be folio or else we can't fit all the plays.

HENRY. So John is finally on board to print and now we have no printers.

ALICE. Something's rotten in that.

JOHN. Tarry now. I tried today and I'll try tomorrow. Where there's a will...

William Jaggard enters the Tap House with a cane and guided by his son, Isaac.

JAGGARD. Good day gentlemen. Do I find any of the King's Men present here?

JOHN. You do, sir, but the theatre's entrance is around the corner and I'm afraid the show's not till 3.

JAGGARD. Thank you lass, but I'm not here for a show. My sight is as useless as a hat on a fish.

ISAAC. I believe we find Masters Condell and Heminges, do we not?

JOHN. You do, sir. And my daughter, Alice.

ISAAC. Milady.

Isaac bows to her grandly, she doesn't usually get that kind of deference.

ALICE. *(Awkwardly—she thinks he's cute and totally loses her composure.)* Oh. Welcome...good...sir.

JOHN. *(Defensive of Alice.)* And who are you, sirs?

JAGGARD. We hope to engage you men in a conversation about the plays of William Shakespeare of which we hear rumor you are arranging for print.

HENRY. Yes sir, that we are. How do you come to know this?

JAGGARD. I know everything on Fleet Street. I know the cost of paper in Normandy, I know which whores have crabs (most of them), and I know that you are asking every printer in town about some grand project but not me.

ISAAC. We are printers, sirs.

JOHN. You are?

JAGGARD. This is my son, Isaac, who manages the presses I have, large ones too, folio imprint, and the like.

ALICE. "Folio"?

JOHN. Well we are glad to make your acquaintance. Please sit.

ALICE. A drink for you, sir? Or your son?

ISAAC. Thank you, milady.

Alice gives him a drink.

JAGGARD. You say you have a great many of the man's plays? How many?

HENRY. We have eighteen or so all together. None of them ever printed before. We have his *Caesar, Macbeth—*

REBECCA. The book, John.

JOHN. The book.

*As the room melts into the darkness of a dream,
Rebecca stands and walks away.*

REBECCA. When the world gets too dark.

JOHN. Too dark to bear.

REBECCA. The words, John. There's light in them.

JOHN. Yes. Light.

REBECCA. There's life in them.

JOHN. Yes. Life.

REBECCA. Good night, John.

JOHN. *(Now quoting Hamlet.)* Good night,

REBECCA. Good night,

JOHN. Sweet prince.

REBECCA. Dear John.

JOHN. And may flights of angels

REBECCA. sing thee to thy—

Then Rebecca is gone. She was never there.

JOHN. Rest.

*John, so alone, looks out to us as the scene reveals its true location.
The Globe Theatre at night, John standing midstage alone but
for a candle.*

He wears all black. Mourning.

He twists a sprig of rosemary in his fingers.

HENRY. John.

Henry walks on, carefully carrying a lantern...

John. It's midnight, you shouldn't be here.

JOHN. What?

HENRY. I said you shouldn't be here. Come with me. Come home.

JOHN. There is no home without her. There is no *where* to go.

HENRY. I know it feels that way. I know it does. But you can come with me.

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JOHN. Why?

HENRY. Because this is the hardest thing you'll ever go through and I won't have you go through it alone. Elizabeth insists you come and eat with us. Come and eat.

JOHN. I have never thought food as useless as I do now.

Pause.

HENRY. Then we'll both starve.

Onstage.

In the dark.

*Henry sits down next to John on the empty stage.
Pause.*

When my first boy died, only months old, I couldn't imagine a loving God that would have any part in such a thing. And I told Him so in my prayers, silent because I know I'd be the one in the ground if anyone heard what I thought of God and His taking and taking and taking. Then I realized the great weight of every grieving father's prayers that must hit God every night, and must sound so much like my own. Sons who lost fathers, husbands without wives, mothers—oh God the mothers. All that grief on God's ear constantly.

Then I felt bad for God.

Which made me laugh.

Which made me feel alive again. Funny how that worked out didn't it.

JOHN. That's a good story. Why do we bother?

HENRY. With what?

JOHN. With stories. Dramas. Especially the dramas. Isn't that ridiculous? Grown men dressing up as kings and, even more ridiculously, *queens*. And the people come to see it. And they laugh. But they also weep. They weep with us. Why do they do it?

HENRY. Because stories are real in their own way.

JOHN. No. Real life keeps going on and on, and the villains aren't caught and the endings aren't right, and it's rough seas and dark days and we sit here in this *barn* playing fictions for willing dreamers. We tell it over and over and over again. And I sit through it and it's false and it's hot air and I need it. When I have nothing left to say I need it. When I hurt so much I can't breathe, when I've got a horse for a heart

HENRY / JOHN

and it won't stop running and pounding and running me down, I need it...

HENRY. John—

JOHN. Am I godless? I look to fairies and false kings instead of holy people. Does that a heathen make?

HENRY. No. Of course not, no.

JOHN. I cannot breathe without her, I cannot breathe at home or in the street or in the yard where she now lies, I cannot breathe in this world but here. Here I am come. And I am lulled into meaning. And that is greatest fiction of all. *Meaning anything. (Then with great ferocity.) And God and His angels mock us every ending we play but the tragic ones, for if they aren't tragedies yet, they will soon enough be.*

Beat.

Story's a forged life. Life's a tempest of loss. Why do we bother with any of it?

HENRY. To feel again.

JOHN. I feel enough.

HENRY. I said to feel *again*. That's the miracle of it. The fairies aren't real but the feeling is. And it comes to us here, player and groundling alike, again and again *here*. Your favorite story just ended? Come back tomorrow, we'll play it again. Don't like the story you're in? A different one starts in an hour. Come here, come again, feel here, feel again.

History walks here, love is lived here, loss is met and wept for and understood and survived here and not the first time but *every* time. We play love's first look and life's last here every day. And you will see yourself in it, or your fear, or your future before the play's end. And you will test your heart against trouble and joy, and every time you'll feel a flicker or a fountain of feeling that reminds you that, yes, you are yet living. And that is more than God gives you in his ample silence. And then it ends. And we players stand up. And we look at the gathered crowd. And we bow. Because the story was told well enough, and it's time for another.

They look at each other.

They look at us right now...or the vacant seats in the Globe Theatre.

And John thinks of Rebecca and out softly comes...Romeo

and Juliet, Act 2, Scene 2.

JOHN. "It is my lady, O, it is my love, O that she knew she were..."
And John weeps. Henry lets him, perhaps holds him, perhaps weeps too.

HENRY. Mourn her, honor her, but do not join her yet.
John breathes, nods.

JOHN. She spoke to me. About the book. She insists

HENRY. Well. She was always wiser than you were.

A careful smile between them.

Alice emerges from the dark, in mourning too. Sick with sorrow.

JOHN. Ali. What are you doing here, what brings you?

ALICE. I don't know. I couldn't think of anywhere else to be...

John runs to her, grabbing her in a desperate, huge hug. They hug and hug and hug.

Blackout.

Transition from One...

A fruit seller walks through town...

FRUIT SELLER. Apples! Pears! Figs and nuts! All the freshest apples, pears, figs, and nuts!

The fruit seller walks off.

COMPOSITOR. Well I never heard of a book with a picture of the author in it. Seems to be beside the point.

MARCUS. Though they won't admit it, I find writers tend to like being noticed.

COMPOSITOR. Even the dead ones?

MARCUS. Especially them.

Jaggard and Isaac enter in a hurry.

JAGGARD. *Goddammit, blasted, shite.*

ISAAC. *Stop the presses. Stop them all.*

MARCUS. What's wrong now?

JAGGARD. *Goddamn, horsey, fucker.*

ISAAC. *I said stop working.*

MARCUS. AllRightAllRight.

ISAAC. How much have you done of *Romeo and Juliet*?

MARCUS. Most all of it.

COMPOSITOR. But you told us to finish the histories before going back to the lovey ones.

MARCUS. We're still ending with *Cymbeline* though, right?

ISAAC. Yes that's not at issue.

MARCUS. I do love that bit with the eagle. Now *that's* how you end a play.

ISAAC. *Marcus.* Have you printed *Troilus*? The order was *Romeo and Juliet* and then *Troilus*. Have you started *Troilus*?

MARCUS. Only a bit of it. The last page of *Romeo* and the first three of *Troilus* share a sheet.

ISAAC. Now they don't.

JAGGARD. *Fuckers.*

MARCUS. Well we've already printed ten of 'em.

ISAAC. Cross them out.

MARCUS. Cross them—?

ISAAC. *Troilus* is pulled. Cross it out on the ones already printed, we can't waste the paper.

JAGGARD. This is not my fault. Walley is a shite man.

ISAAC. You told me you had all the rights for all the plays!

JAGGARD. You never have *all* the rights. You *get* the rights. That's the fun of it.

ISAAC. You start printing things you don't own. This is why everyone in this business hates you.

JAGGARD. This is why everyone in this business knows who I am. I'll fix this.

ISAAC. You can't. Walley said no. In fact he said "No, you lowly rat, never in ten hells would I give it to you."

JAGGARD. Just caught him on a bad day.

ISAAC. You were trying to play him and it failed. This time, the one time we're working on something I care about, you are caught in your deceptions. Now we have *The Collected Works of William Shakespeare Except for That One Play We Lost Because the Publisher Is a Cad.*

JAGGARD. *I said I will fix this.* Walley has friends.

ISAAC. Have you ever wondered what that must be like?

JAGGARD. He has friends who owe me. Let me fix this the way I know how.

ISAAC. We are not putting anything but Shakespeare in this. Do not for a moment think—

JAGGARD. I'm not.

ISAAC. *Do not for a moment think of shoving some crap sonnets by some crap hacks in this book.*

JAGGARD. I've published more books than you've ever seen in your life. There's always something that goes wrong, just let me handle it.

ISAAC. That's why we're in this mess!

JAGGARD. *Trust me.* The rest of the work is set and printed?

MARCUS. All but the Greeky ones.

JAGGARD. Good. Get John and Henry to write something for the front.

ISAAC. What for the front?

JAGGARD. Some introduction. "We knew him, we loved him," whatever. Make it sound like love not profit.

ISAAC. That's what it always has been.

JAGGARD. Then they should have no problem penning it in a hurry. Actually do have them put something in there about buying it. "Buy the book you're reading, don't just read it," something. Then set the title page, roll the engraving, and there you have it. Fourteen comedies, ten histories, and somewhere between ten and eleven tragedies by the great playwright, published according to the True Original Copies, Printed 1623 by...Isaac Jaggard.

ISAAC. ...What?

JAGGARD. This is *your* book, son. The world should know it.

A lovely moment that Marcus destroys.

MARCUS. What about *Timon of Athens*?

Pause.

ISAAC. What?

MARCUS. We could put *Timon of Athens* instead of *Troilus*. I like *Troilus* better but both have their problems and—you know—*Timon* is kinda Greeky too.

Pause.

JAGGARD. I can get *Troilus* back.

ISAAC. *(To Marcus.)* Switch the plates to *Timon of Athens*, reset the contents page, and prep the picture.

MARCUS. About the picture.

MARCUS COMPOSITOR. We'd suggest a bit more shading on the ruff.

MARCUS. Make him look less like dinner.

ISAAC. Like what?

Isaac looks at the image.

Oh God. Tell him to fix it.

MARCUS. Yessir.

ISAAC. Not you, you've got to work.

MARCUS. Yessir. ←

JAGGARD. Isaac, wait.

ISAAC. I'll do it.

JAGGARD. Son.

ISAAC. I have this under control now. And when this shop is mine... I will not run it like you.

Isaac leaves. Jaggard is left.

COMPOSITOR. Do you need some help, sir? Point you in the right direction?

JAGGARD. Somehow...I always know the right direction.

Jaggard shoves the compositor on his way out and walks off.

Six.

At the Globe Tap House.

Alice is reading John and Henry's dedication.

They watch her...

HENRY. What. Alice. Is it bad? I knew it. *I knew it.*

JOHN. Let her read it, Henry.

HENRY. She's been reading it for ten minutes. What's wrong with it?

ALICE. Nothing's wrong with it, I'm reading it carefully.

JOHN. She's reading it carefully.

HENRY. I didn't think we'd have to write something. That's kind of the point of all this. I *speak* the speech.

JOHN. And I pay for it. And neither of us should be let near a quill.

ALICE. "It had bene a thing, we confesse, worthie to have bene wished, that the Author himselfe had liv'd to have set forth, and overseen his owne writings; But since it hath bin ordain'd otherwise, and he by death departed from that right, we pray you do not envie his Friends, the office of their care, and paine, to have collected and publish'd them."

It's good.

HENRY. Is it really?

JOHN. Honestly, Ali. We need your honest eyes on this.

ALICE. The beginning is a bit...pecuniary. "Buy it first. That doth best commend a Booke."

JOHN. Well, if it doesn't sell—

HENRY. Jaggard insisted we put it in.

ALICE. The best bit is at the end. "Who, as he was a happie imitator of Nature, was a most gentle expresser of it. His mind and hand went together." It's very good. Will would have loved it. Mum too.

Ben Jonson trundles onstage. Man is he drunk.

Also. Has he been crying?

→ BEN. I cannot take it. I cannot and will not. I cannot do it, men.

ALICE. What's wrong with you, Ben?

HENRY. Are you well man?

BEN. Do grown men weep in public if they be well?

ALICE. We'll get you a drink.

BEN. I have been drunk for three days straight—

ALICE. No drink then.

BEN. —and without drink I will not last a fourth.

ALICE. Coming right up.

HENRY. Pity's sake, tell us what ill you, Ben.

BEN. William. Bloody. Shakespeare.

He starts to cry again, can't help it, trying to stop.

God help me, here I go again.

JOHN. Ben—sit—what on earth—?

BEN. I started your lines—some tepid praise, some "good man, good words, hey nonny nonny." Then I said, let me read a play or two to remind myself. I set out at midnight, drag Crane from bed, "show me Shakespeare!"

Cries again, can't help it.

And I read everything.

Hates that he liked it so much.

That man. *Hamlet, Lear, Romeo and What's-Her-Name.*

ALICE. You read them all.

HENRY. And at once?

JOHN. That'd be too much for anyone.

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BEN. I'd only ever *heard* the plays, *seen* them, never...*been alone with them.* And there I was. And there they were, these pinnacles of story, these peaks of heart, and I *hate* heart! The way he grows in the writing too. As a man himself. But even young the wisdom he put down. How did he know those things so young? How could he? God help me. I started drinking and haven't stopped since.

JOHN. Oh dear.

ALICE. Perhaps some food instead of ale.

HENRY. I know the feeling you're in, Ben. I do and I respect it. But I need to ask if you penned the lines yet?

BEN. What.

HENRY. The printing's almost done and we just need those few lines to say you knew him.

BEN. *Of course I knew him. I was with him the day before he...he died.*

I was there and I could've...

JOHN. Ben, no. It's not your fault.

BEN. What if it was, I could have stopped him.

JOHN. You couldn't have.

ALICE. It was a fever. What's to be done?

BEN. He was drinking *with me*, he was out *with me*. We gorged ourselves, we fought, we drank, we drank more. I could've sent him home, I didn't. Out from the Stratford pub hot and drunk and he steps outside and falls asleep in the snow. I find him half an hour later and he's...the fever was already in him. I could've...

JOHN. No, Ben. Release yourself from that.

BEN. I miss him. I miss the fight, I miss the work. I miss the world. The one we had and loved is gone. ←

JOHN. No one can help the passing of time nor friends.

HENRY. That's why this is so urgent.

BEN. YesYesYes "he lives on in art" I wrote your damn lines. Take them and let me drink and bemoan time's cruel reaping in the corner. *(To Alice.)* Unless of course you'd like to—?

ALICE. Not even a little.

BEN, ALICE, HENRY, JOHN