

Will drops the laundry basket on to the floor, and proceeds to open the curtains and make the bed.

Wessex Who is this?

He pulls open the curtains to reveal Will in a dress.

Viola My . . . laundry maid.

Will And chaperone. My Lady's country cousin. And we'll be kissing cousins when her purse is open to you.

Wessex Do you have many relatives?

Viola None so dear as Cousin Wilhemina, my Lord.

Will You may call me Miss Wilhemina!

Wessex On a more fortuitous occasion, perhaps. Come, Viola, we must go!

Will *(getting very close to Wessex)* Oh, My Lord, you will not shake me off, she never needed me more, I swear by your breeches you be a handsome gallanr, just as she said.

Wessex Viola! Come with me.

Will Wait for me, My Lord.

Music. Fanfares lead us into . . .

SCENE TWO
GREENWICH

The Queen, her attendants and Court assemble.

Music underscore.

Wessex Now?

Tilney Now, my Lord.

Wessex The Queen asks for you. Answer well.

Tilney escorts Viola through the crowd – this is a formal affair. He leads her to the Queen. Being without Viola, Wessex takes Will by the arm.

There is a man behind this pretence.

Will A man, My Lord?

Wessex I am no fool. There was a poet . . . a theatre poet I heard. Does he come to the house?

Will A poet?

Wessex An insolent penny-a-page rogue, Marlowe. A Christopher Marlowe. Has he been to the house?

Will Marlowe. Oh yes, he be the one. Lovely doublet, shame about the verse.

Wessex The dog!

Tilney presents Viola to the Queen.

Queen What a smile you have, Mr Tilney. Like a brass plate on a coffin.

Tilney Thank you, Your Majesty. The Lady Viola de Lesseps.

Viola Your Highness.

Queen Stand up straight, girl.

Viola straightens. The Queen examines her.

I have seen you. You are the one who comes to all the plays . . . at Whitehall, at Richmond.

Viola Your Majesty.

Queen What do you love so much?

Viola Your Majesty . . . ?

Queen Speak out! I know who I am. Do you love stories of kings and queens? Fears of arms? Or is it courtly love?

Viola I love theatre. To have stories acted for me by a company of fellows is indeed –

Queen They are not acted for you, they are acted for me.

A chorus of obsequious laughter follows from Tilney and the Court. This recurs at each of the Queen's witticisms.

And . . . ?

Viola I love poetry above all.

Queen Above Lord Wessex? My Lord, when you cannot find your wife you had better look for her at the playhouse.

Tilney Hardly a place for a young lady of breeding, Your Majesty.

Queen Oh, I am all for the theatre, Mr Tilney. But playwrights teach nothing about love, they make it pretty, they make it comical, or they make it just. They cannot make it true.

Viola Oh, but they can.

A gasp that Viola would dare contradict the Queen.

Tilney Her Majesty is not in the habit of being contradicted.

Viola I mean . . . Your Majesty, they do not, they have not, but I believe there is one who can.

Horrified, Wessex rushes to intervene.

Wessex Lady Viola is . . . young in the world. Your Majesty is wise in it. Nature and truth are the very enemies of playacting. I'll wager my fortune.

Queen I thought you were here because you had none. Well, will anyone take Lord Wessex up on his wager? Mr Tilney?

Tilney The Lord Chamberlain cannot be seen to gamble, Your Majesty.

Queen Lady Viola, it seems no one will risk this wager. Will Fifty pounds.

Shock and horror. Queen Elizabeth is the only person amused.

Queen I hear from somewhere fifty pounds. A very worthy sum on a very worthy question. Can a play show us the very truth and nature of love? I bear witness to the wager, and will be the judge of it as occasion arises.

Tilney A conceit of genius, Your Majesty.

He leads a scatter of applause.

Queen I have not seen anything to settle it yet. So. The fireworks will be soothing after the excitements of Lady Viola's audience.

The whole Court turns to look at the fireworks.

(Intimately to Wessex.) Have her then, but you are a lordly fool. She has been plucked since I saw her last and not by you. It takes a woman to know it.

Wessex *(aside)* Marlowe. I will kill the wretch.

He turns to watch the fireworks just beginning. There are gasps from the crowd at each explosion.

Will I must away to my pages. I will see you at the theatre.

Viola Please, Will, be careful.

Will Don't worry, no one will recognise me here.

He turns and immediately bumps into Marlowe.

Marlowe Will! Is there something you haven't told me?

Will What are you doing here?

Marlowe I have come incognito.

Will What for?

Marlowe Call it a truant disposition. Don't you have a play to write?

Will Yes, but I have a commission of the heart. Lady

Viola -

Marlowe (*interrupting*) Don't get distracted, Will. God has given you one face, and you run around with another, in a dress! Leave deception to those better suited. Go home and finish your play. You could be the best of all of us. Besides, what if you were caught?

Will And what about you, Kit?

Marlowe Don't worry, no one is going to recognise me here.

Burbage enters.

Burbage Marlowe.

Marlowe Burbage.

Will moves to exit.

Burbage Hello, young lady.

Will laughs girlishly as he leaves.

Marlowe What are you doing here, Burbage?

Burbage Actually I have come to give my Faustus for Her Majesty this very evening.

Marlowe Your Faustus? Burbage, you thief. You already owe me twenty pounds. My *Massacre at Paris* is completed, or shall I give the play to Ned Alleyn?

Burbage You have the pages?

Marlowe You have the money?

Burbage Tomorrow.

Marlowe Then tomorrow you have the pages. When I've had what I am owed for your royal *Faustus*.

Burbage Come, what is money to men like us? Besides, if I need a play I have another waiting, a comedy by Shakespeare.

Marlowe *Romeo*? He gave it to Henslowe.

Burbage Never!

Burbage I gave Shakespeare two sovereigns for *Romeo*! Marlowe You did. But Henslowe rehearses it as we speak.

Burbage Treachery! Traitor and thief.

Marlowe Well, I am to Deptford. Tomorrow.

Burbage Won't you stay, Kit, for my performance?

Marlowe I refuse to stay and see myself murdered here tonight. Twenty pounds, Burbage. The fee simple! Oh, simple!

Burbage Henslowe is rehearsing my play?

Marlowe With Alleyn. As we speak.

SCENE THREE
THE BIG FIGHT

Ned Gentlemen, from the top of the scene, with words.

The scene assembles; Ned, playing Mercutio, and Nol as Benvolio have swords and are squared up against Robin as Tybalt, Peter as Pertuccio and Ralph as another Capulet. They too have swords. Elsewhere Wabash measures Sam for a costume, Webster reads a script in a corner and Henslowe and Fennyman look on.

Webster Should've let me play Ethel then, shouldn't ya.

Webster exits. Fennyman arrives in his blue cap.

Fennyman Everything all right?

Henslowe Closed before we opened. Let's pack everything up.

Burbage Hold! Enemies. Brothers. Lend me your ears. We may indeed be rivals in art but we are jointly despised as vagrants, tinkers, peddlers of bombast. Which in my case might be true. But (*to Musicians*) gentlemen – (*They start to play.*) My father James Burbage had the first licence to form a company of players and he drew from all the poets of the age. Their fame will be our fame. So let them all know, we are men of parts. We are a fraternity, and we will be a profession. Will Shakespeare has a play. I have a theatre. To be frank the posters are already posted. Damn the Lord Chamberlain. The Curtain is yours.

Henslowe There is no time to be lost. We will play Romeo this Saturday at the Curtain.

Burbage But who will be our Romeo?

Will stands utterly bereft.

Henslowe Will. You had better learn the part.

The stage clears except for Will, who stands shattered. Then magisterial music plays.

SCENE SEVEN THE WEDDING

The Wedding of Wessex and Viola as a dumbshow masque. It is given to beautiful music. Viola appears in a wedding dress. Sir Robert takes her by the hand and

leads the bride to Wessex. The Nurse looks on. The marriage takes place in a grand scene of ceremony all in the language of the theatre of the Court, the language of Inigo Jones – aristocratic theatre contrasting hugely with the speed and fluency of Shakespeare's rough world of the playhouse. Viola is solemn, brokenhearted. The whole scene is formal and excruciating, as we know Viola is consigning herself to a lifetime of misery. The bride and groom are married and finally kiss in a shaft of white light. The scene changes to:

SCENE EIGHT ESCAPE

A room in the de Lesseps household. Sir Robert is at a desk, Wessex is in attendance. The Nurse looks on.

Sir Robert de Lesseps Lord Wessex. Son-in-law. I trust you are all set.

Wessex Indeed, sir, we are for Virginia this afternoon. All is as planned. Except for the matter of the money.

Sir Robert de Lesseps By these drafts in my hand you gain five thousand pounds.

Wessex Thank you, but would you oblige me fifty or so in gold? To settle my accounts at the dockside.

He shouts off to Viola.

Come, Viola. We must away.

Sir Robert opens the desk and unlocks the gold.

What is she doing?

Wessex attempts to go upstairs but the Nurse stops him.

Nurse Please, sir, may I ask of you that you be good to her, sir?

Wessex Of course.

Nurse Treat her kindly, sir.

Wessex I will.

Nurse You are a good man, sir.

Wessex Thank you.

Nurse I feel it in my heart. A very good man, sir.

Wessex Please let go of my arm. There's a good nurse.

Nurse God bless you, sir.

Wessex extracts himself from the Nurse.

And another thing, sir.

Wessex Let it wait, woman, we must away. Come, Viola. The tide waits for no man.

He goes upstairs and sees that Viola is not there.

Wessex Viola. She's gone!

The Nurse opens up a playbill she has had hidden.

Nurse Gone, sir?

Sir Robert de Lesseps Gone?

Nurse *(aside)* Oh yes, she has gone.

Sir Robert de Lesseps Gone where?

Nurse I don't know, sir.

Wessex, arriving back downstairs, sees the playbill behind the Nurse's back and takes it from her.

Wessex What is this?

As Wessex reads, Fennyman slowly enters on to the stage accompanied by portentous music

By permission of Mr Burbage
A Hugh Fennyman production
of Mr Henslowe's presentation of
The Admiral's Men in performance of
The Excellent and Lamentable Tragedy of
Romeo and Juliet
Featuring Mr Fennyman as the Apothecary
at the Curtain Theatre.

SCENE NINE
BACKSTAGE AT THE CURTAIN

We are at the Curtain.

Fennyman

Such mortal drugs I have but Mantua's law
Is death to any he that utters them.

(To Musicians.) Shut it!

Then him. Then me.

The stage erupts with the company.

Henslowe Beginners to the stage, please. This is your
two-minute call.

Ned Good luck, gentlemen. Break a leg!

Henslowe Cheer up, Will. It's a full house. Two thousand
people.

Will Are you okay, Sam? The whole thing is hopeless.

Henslowe At least it's stopped raining.

Will Half of the company are sick with the flu. The
other half have no idea what their lines are. We'll be
lynched, Henslowe.

Burbage Contempt? You closed the Rose. What charge do you lay against the Curtain?

Tilney That woman is a woman!

The entire audience and the actors recoil and gasp.

Ned A woman?!

Tilney Yes. So in the name of Her Majesty Queen

Elizabeth . . .

Then a voice:

Queen (off) Have a care with my name, you'll wear it out.

The Queen comes onstage. She is dressed in a black cloak with a hood. She takes it off and reveals her resplendent costume. Now the whole thing looks like a masque. A formal tableau: the Queen – the deus ex machina – at the centre. She notices Tilney's yellow stockings.

Queen Oh, you are sick of self-love, Lord Chamberlain. The Queen of England does not attend exhibitions of public lewdness, so something is out of joint. Come here, Master Kent. Let me look at you.

Viola comes forward and is about to curtsy when she catches the Queen's eye, an arresting eye, which arrests the curtsy and turns it into a sweeping bow.

Yes, the illusion is remarkable and your error, Tilney, easily forgiven, but I know something of a woman in a man's profession, yes, by God. I do know about that. That is enough from you, Master Kent. If only Lord Wessex were here.

Webster He is, Ma'am.

He gets Wessex from the trap.

Wessex Unhand me, you stockfish. Your Majesty.

Queen There was a wager, I remember . . . as to whether a play can show us the very truth and nature of love. I think you lost your wager today. (To Webster.) You are an eager boy. Did you like this play?

Webster I liked it when she stabbed herself.

Queen And your name, young man?

Webster John Webster, Your Majesty.

Queen You will go far.

Webster Cor. Fanks!

The Queen fixes Will with a beady eye.

Queen Master Shakespeare. Next time you come to Greenwich, come as yourself and we will speak some more.

Wessex Your Majesty! How is this to end?

Queen As stories must when love's denied with tears and a journey. Those whom God has joined in marriage, not even I can put asunder. Master Kent, Lord Wessex, as I foretold, has lost his wife at the playhouse – go make your farewell and send her out. It's time to settle accounts. How much was the wager?

Wessex Fifty shillings. Pounds.

Queen Give it to Master Kent. He will see it rightfully home.

Wessex gives the purse to Kent. Viola turns and hands the money to Will.

Viola/Kent I believe this is rightfully yours, Master Shakespeare. I wish you a long and glorious career.