

The Duke

or

Where there's a Will there's a Play

by

Nicholas Richards

Copyright © July 2020 Nicholas Richards and Off the
Wall Play Publishers

<https://offthewallplays.com>

This script is provided for reading purposes only Professionals and amateurs are hereby advised that it is subject to royalty It is fully protected under the laws of South Africa, the United States of America, the British Empire including the Dominion of Canada and all other countries of the Copyright Union. All rights including but not limited to professional amateur film radio and all other media including use on the worldwide web and the rights of translation into foreign languages are strictly reserved and any unauthorized use of the material may subject the user to any and all applicable civil and criminal penalties. For any information about royalties or to apply for a performance license please click the following link :

<https://offthewallplays.com/royalties-and-licensing-of-plays-sold-by-off-the-wall-plays/>

The Duke

or

Where there's a Will there's a Play

A playwright seeks inspiration in the forest

Dramatis Personae

Will – a maker of plays

Fool – a fool

Ralph Atwood – cobbler of Snitterfield

Ursula – daughter to Ralph

Adam – helpful uncle to Ursula, brother to Ralph

Sir Edwin de Luce, Duke of Chalcot

Sir Tobit Penchaunt – friend to Ralph

Weird Ones – three strange beings of the forest

Sir Polydore}

Welton}

Maltby}

Seldun} – men of Duke Edwin's court

Tom the Carpenter}

Jack Draper}

Harry Pint}

Huw Powys}

Perkin Bagpot}

Nick Mallow}

Silas the Charcoal Burner} - forest folk

Fortunatus - a wizard

Cowslip – dumb assistant to Fortunatus

Barnaby – a boy spy

The play is set in the Forest of Arden in Jacobean times in the course of a single day. The action all takes place in the same location, and the division into scenes is for the convenience of rehearsal.

Scene 1a

(Morning in the Forest of Arden. The backdrop is the greenwood. On stage a large tree stump. In the audience – perhaps in the front row facing Stage Left - sits discreetly the Fool, his clothes disguised under an inconspicuous jacket. Enter Left Will, holding some sheets of paper and a writing case containing quill and ink. He stands at the edge of the stage, his eyes sweep across the scene; and he speaks his own stage directions.)

Will: A forest clearing. (Walks towards the centre.) Enter a man – of middle years, a maker of plays. (Surveys the backdrop) He seeks inspiration in the trees... and, finding none, sits on a tree-stump with a sigh. (Sits on the stump with a sigh, takes out his quill and begins to write.) This playmaker must make a play – and with speed! (He writes some words, shakes his head, crumples up the paper and throws it into the audience; then tries again, with many mutterings and sighs. He then stands up, comes forward and, surveying the audience, declaims a wry prologue.)

I see them now, the throng in hushed array,
Awaiting entertainment, eager-eyed
And rapt, expectant for the promised play,
Their joy and pleasure not to be denied.
And I, the author - but no author I!
(For naught is written, nor is aught conceived!)
Now must I give the waiting crowd a lie?
The cast is sick... but will that be believed?
Our leading player's just stormed off in rage:
We can't today put on the show rehearsed.
There's been, I say, a dreadful fire backstage,
And sure we must put health and safety first.
Forsooth, I cannot tell such falsehoods! No,
I must be honest wherefore there's no show.

(He walks around, looking hopelessly at the trees.)

And so I wander through the forest green,
And hope that inspiration here I'll find;
But still have I not penned a single scene,
Nor plot have I nor episode in mind.
And when I face the hungry audience
This shameful disappointment I'll announce:
Hie you home, for I regret to say
My pen has failed; for you there is no play.

(Will throws his paper to the ground, bows his head heavily and begins to walk Upstage. The Fool coughs meaningfully. Will stops in surprise and looks back.)

Will: Who coughs? Methought I was alone. (He peers around.) Who's there?

Fool: (From his seat) One is seldom alone in the forest, Will.

Will: (Seeing the Fool) You know me?

Fool: Why, we all know you in these parts - as an ingenious writer of plays most fantastical and tragical and comical and...

Will: And who are you, sirrah, that praise my plays so highly?

Fool: A fool.

Will: **(Glumly, sitting again on the stump)** Praise for a dried-out writer from a forest fool!

Fool: Are you telling us, Will, that your pen has finally run dry? That you have no more plays for us?

Will: My company is soon to play in Oxford, and they urgently require of me a new play. I waited hours at my desk but my weary Muse came not. Now in the forest I seek a story amidst the trees – but... **(with a shrug)** here is no food for my fancy. **(Rises and makes to leave; tersely)** I bid you good day.

Fool: Wait! **(He rises and approaches the stage.)** What have you written thus far?

Will: **(Looking sheepishly at his paper)** *A Forest. Enter a man...*

Fool: **(Mounting the stage and saying decisively)** *Enter a Fool.*

(Will is nonplussed as the Fool strides towards him.)

Will: My play wants no fool.

Fool: Why so it does! Even that grim Danish play had a fool: to wit, Yorick.

Will: Yorick died three and twenty years before his appearance in Hamlet.

Fool: That was a foolish fool – to die three and twenty years before his cue! Here's a living fool for your play, Will. **(Indicating the paper in Will's hand)** Set it down: *Enter a Fool.*

Will: **(Shrugs and writes)** And what then?

Fool: Why then the Fool will make things happen. He will stir up fantastic scenes from the mystery of the forest.

Will: Quick or dead, one fool doth not a play make. **(Looking at his script)** Thus far I have: *A Forest. Enter a man and a Fool.* It is not much.

Fool: It is a beginning.

Will: I need a tale. The forest and my head are vacant.

Fool: You thought it empty – yet I was here, Will. And if you listen you will hear much else to nourish your fancy. Harken to the pregnant sound of the forest...!

(A short pause. Gentle forest sounds; but Will is too impatient to wait long.)

Will: I hear nothing, Fool.

Fool: Nay, but soft a while...

(Again a short pause. The Fool seems to be hearing something in the distance; Will looks bored.)

Will: Naught but the birds and the breeze in the trees... **(He stops and cocks his head as he hears something.)**

Fool: Away with pribble prabble! Allow your ears to note the...

Will: Sh!

(Faint voices Off of Adam and Ursula Atwood, uncle and niece, searching for Ursula's father)

Ursula: **(Calling)** Father...!

Adam: This way. Come now.

Ursula: Father...! O where art thou, Ralph Atwood?

Will: Hear you not that?

Ursula: **(In a sing-song voice)** Father, father, where art thou roaming?

Adam: Cease, child: thou'lt be heard by bandits and rogues sooner than by thy father.

Fool: **(Musing to himself and oblivious of his own advice)** That is the trouble with the folk of our times: forever prating yet not noting what is around...

Will: Peace, Fool! **(Looking Left)** See where they come!

Ursula: Whither now?

Adam: See ahead: a clearing. We rest there awhile.

Fool: A boy – and a man. And I wager they bring a good tale with them.

Will: Stand we apart and observe.

Fool: This perchance may be food for your play.

Will: Soft!

(Will and the Fool take themselves apart Right, and watch.)

Scene 1b

(Enter Upstage Ursula, disguised as a boy, and Adam.)

Ursula: How far is't now to Chalcot?

Adam: Barely half a league farther.

Ursula: **(Sitting upon the stump.)** O but my spirits are weary, and I die of hunger! **(Changing tone as she takes in her surroundings)** How beautiful this glade!

Adam: **(With a smile)** It is called *The Place of the Oak*. As a lad oft would I come here, and climb **(with a grand gesture towards Ursula)** that oak, which, to my childish fancy, reigned serenely over the clearing like a benign monarch.

Ursula: **(Looking around)** What oak?

Adam: Thou sittest upon what remains. Duke Edwin had it felled, maybe to repair his unfriendly drawbridge. It pleases the Duke to remove what is beautiful and grand. He would lay flat the whole Forest of Arden had he axes and men enough.

Ursula: I do not like what I hear of the Duke.

Fool: If you knew what I could tell you!

Ursula: **(Looking around uneasily)** Are we alone, Uncle Adam? I feel eyes upon me.

Adam: One is seldom alone in the forest, coz...

Fool: As I told you, Will.

Will: Hush, Fool!

Adam: And this place is much visited by the folk of Arden for their assemblies, their sport...

Ursula: And it would make a fine theatre. **(Gets up and sweeps around the stage.)** I can imagine that the creatures of the forest use it as their arena, and perform sweet pastorals for the watching trees.

Adam: In my boyish play I would populate this glade with the cast of my fancy. Knights, fairies, kings and common folk would go busily around this tree-bounded cockpit, doing fantastic deeds at the bidding of my fertile mind.

Ursula: Dost thou ever wonder, nuncle...?

Adam: What, chuck?

Ursula: Dost thou ever wonder if we ourselves be merely actors?

Adam: What meanst thou, child?

Ursula: Why, we seem to say what we mean and do what we will, yet really the world may be but a stage on which we play parts and speak lines writ by another long before...

Fool: The boy speaks wisely.

Ursula: Watched the while by an audience we see not.

Will: Aye – for we watch them e’en now.

Adam: I used to imagine many things, coz; but now my mind is old and practical – and we shall not save your father with philosophy. **(He moves Left and points Off.)** See the castle?

Ursula: **(Spotting it for the first time)** Castle Chalcot! It is not far.

Adam: Your father may be there even now.

Ursula: **(With decision)** Then go we thither forthwith!

Adam: Better thou stayest here, child. I will go alone and make inquiry.

Ursula: I am no longer a child, Uncle Adam!

Adam: In my eyes thou art not much more. But wert thou a full-grown Hercules thou shouldst not go into that lion's den. The Duke may have taken thy father prisoner; and should he discover who thou wert belike he would throw thee too into a dank cell.

Ursula: They do say the Duke is a cruel lord.

Adam: They do.

Fool: And so do I.

Adam: Therefore I fear for thy father.

Fool: See, Will! A play unfolds before your eyes!

Will: Peace – or you will spoil the show.

Adam: I shall return shortly. Stray not far.

Fool: *Enter a boy and a man...*

Will: Peace, Fool!

(Ursula looks in the direction of Will and the Fool, clearly hearing something. Adam makes to leave Left.)

Fool: *Let me come to the castle, says the boy. Nay, tis too dangerous, says Uncle, one hight Adam...*

Will: Peace, will you!

Ursula: And if a wolf perchance appear...?

Adam: There will be no wolves so early, coz. And if there be - well, thou hast trees to climb.

Ursula: Or a bear?

(Adam and Ursula smile and share a wry laugh. The Fool and Will exchange puzzled looks. Adam moves Left.)

Ursula: Do not be long, Uncle Adam! Wilt thou meet with the Duke himself?

Adam: I may.

Ursula: Take care!

Adam: I shall, coz. Now be of good cheer, and all will be well. Thou hast a dagger, a brave heart and a manly name.

Ursula: Aye, Adam.

Adam: **(Encouragingly)** And what is thy manly name?

Ursula: **(Adopting a brave gesture and tone)** I am called *Roland*!

Adam: Brave Roland, I call thee!
(Adam nods with a smile and departs Left.)

Scene 1c

(Ursula wanders around a little and then sits on the stump facing Left, looking where Adam is going. Suddenly her bravery collapses and she dissolves into a paroxysm of sobbing. Will and the Fool exchange looks.)

Ursula: O that we were now in some cheerful comedy with a happy end, in which we recover Father; and all doth end well. **(Putting head in hands)** Ay me! **(Sobs.)**

Will: We should not sit by with the boy so distressed.

Fool: Let us comfort the poor lad.

(The Fool and Will emerge from cover. Ursula is too distracted to notice until the Fool coughs to alert her.)

Ursula: Who coughs? **(She turns, sees Will and the Fool and looks for a moment in amazement.)**

Fool: **(Striding towards Ursula)** Young lad, we heard your weeping, and we come to your ai-...

(Ursula draws a dagger with sudden energy. Will and Fool back away in alarm.)

Ursula: Keep your distance – or lose your lives!

Fool: Nay, but peace, young sir! Put that away. We mean no harm.

Ursula: And who are you, that I should trust you?

Fool: I am but a fool. And this is Will. The only thing to fear from Will is that he put you in one of his plays.

Ursula: I am already in a tragedy of mine own.

Will: You have lost your father, young Roland.

Ursula: **(Looking up, suspiciously)** How know you that? And my name?

Fool: We overheard you with your uncle.

Ursula: Fine eavesdropping, sirs! **(Slowly putting away the dagger)** I am sorry for drawing on you - but I am a stranger to the forest and I have heard that here range villains and beasts aplenty.

Fool: Aye, marry, 'tis so – but we are no villains. Why, we may help you find your father. Paint us a picture of him, if you will.

Ursula: Paint...? I have no paint...

Will: In words, boy...

(Ralph, wearing a yellow jerkin, red breeches, a green kerchief, and a cap with a feather, appears below the apron...)

Ursula: A word-painting: ah.

Will: That we may behold your sire in our minds' eyes.

Ursula: Well, my father is of middle years, a cobbler by trade ...

(Ralph walks about nonchalantly, aimlessly and unaware of what is happening on stage.)

Ursula: He left home yestereve in yellow jerkin and red breeches...

(Will looks at the Fool; both look about the stage.)

Ursula: A green kerchief about his neck... and a cap with a feather in't.

Fool: I have seen no one so oddly clad.

Will: To what name does he answer?

Ursula: The Duke of Chalcot.

(Will and the Fool both show puzzlement. Exit Right Ralph, still unnoticed and unnoticed.)

Fool: The Duke of Chalcot? But the Duke lives in yon castle - with no son. Nor has any lady the misfortune to be his wife.

Ursula: You asked what name does my father answer to – and I answer you truly. You see, while I have lost my father he, poor man, has lost his wits.

Will: And he thinks he is the Duke?

Ursula: He is *sure* he is the Duke. He said he would instruct Duke Edwin to surrender the title.

Fool: **(With a shake of the head and a whistle)** Duke Edwin is not a jovial man: it will please him nothing to meet one who claims his dukedom.

Will: And in a yellow jerkin!

Ursula: I fear he will be misused.

Fool: But what drama when your father meets the Duke! A rich scene for your play, Will! **(He acts out the scene in comic fashion, sitting on the stump for the Duke, standing for Ralph.)** Duke Edwin: *What wouldst thou here, varlet?* Roland's father: *I am the Duke.* Edwin: *What sayest thou, cretinous vermin? I am the Duke!* **(He keeps changing position but without citing the speakers' names.)** *Thou'rt mistaken, false lord! I am the Duke of Chalcot!* **(Seated Edwin)** *Nay, I am, forsooth!* **(Standing Ralph)** *Nay, thou art not!* **(Edwin)** *Have done, fish-brain!* **(Carries on a few times with nays and insults.)** Will, you be the boy's father.

(Will now acts the standing Ralph; the routine resumes.)

Fool: *Who art thou that makst this groundless claim? Speak, vile toad: thy name?*

Will: **(To Ursula)** What is my name?

Ursula: **(Unhappily)** Ralph Atwood.

Will: **(To the Fool, as Ralph)** *Ralph Atwood I am. And the Duke of Chalcot to boot.*

(The Fool strikes Will, to Will's evident surprise. Meantime Ursula grows steadily more upset by this comic dramatisation, and hides her tearful face pitifully in her hands.)

Fool: *Thou liest, putrid worm that thou art! Hither, Maltby, Welton: Take this creature hence – to the kitchens, where, like Simnel the pretender, he shall spend the rest of his worthless life turning the spit!*

(Will notices Ursula's misery.)

Will: Cease, Fool! Stop the play!

(Fool stops his fooling; he and Will look at Ursula.)

Will: See how the poor boy is affected. **(To Fool, curiously)** Maltby and Welton? Who they?

Ursula: **(Tearfully)** I am no boy. **(Looking up uneasily - as if she has given herself away)** I am a young man.

(Will goes over to Ursula and lays a comforting hand on her shoulder.)

Will: And a brave young man indeed – to venture through the forest to rescue your father.

Ursula: **(Recovering composure)** I have my manly strength and dagger keen.

Fool: And now you have us! - if you would accept our help?

Ursula: That is nobly kind of you! But have you no business you must attend?

Fool: Will has his play to write – but that should not take him long, now he has the beginnings of a plot.

Will: **(Wryly)** Says the Fool.

Fool: Here's a bargain, young Roland: If we help steer your present drama to a happy end, will you allow Will to put you and your story into his new play?

Ursula: If you could make all end well for me and my family, why, then you may make a play with me.

Fool: Excellent, i'faith!

Will: And you could play yourself when we perform it at Oxford – if your father allow.

Ursula: My father... **(Sighs)** Nothing will come of anything unless we find him.

Fool: And find him we shall! **(Looking around in a show of confidence)** Your uncle is presently gone to the castle. Let us meantime look hereabouts for your errant sire. **(Leading Right)** This way. I know well the forest, and I know where a man may hide.

Ursula: My father is not the hiding sort. I wish he were.

Fool: Then so much the easier our search.

(They all move Right.)

Fool: We'll find your father ere the close of day;
And as we quest our Will may find a play.

(Exeunt Right.)

Scene 2a

(Enter Left Ralph Atwood. He sings cheerily a song to himself.)

Ralph:
*Though March winds blow such horrid cold,
And fields and ways be foul and bleak,
Sheep close huddle in the fold,
Whiles gale-tossed birds do shelter seek,
Yet still I sing my happy lay
For wintry March will soon away.*

(Enter Right, unnoticed by the singing Ralph, Sir Tobit Penchaunt, a knight and friend of Ralph, armed with a sword.)

*The buds no more will frost offend,
And Eastertide shall follow Lent;
Winter's reign will swiftly end
And yield to Spring the government;
And you shall hear my gladsome lay
From April through to sunny May!*

*And then as days grow long and warm,
And... And...*

Ralph: I remember not. **(Tries to recall)** *And then as days grow long and warm...*

(Sir Tobit comes forward and sings the next lines – to Ralph's pleasant surprise.)

Tobit: *And golden turns the ripening corn,
Trees stand proud in emerald form
Around the daisy-speckled lawn;*

Ralph: } **(Together)**
Tobit: } *Then still you'll hear all summer long
Me sing full-voiced my cheerful song.*

Tobit: **(Heartily)** Sir Ralph, my newfound noble lord!

Ralph: How now, Sir Tobit!

Tobit: Your news, my lord, your news! You met with the Duke? – I mean the *false* Duke.

Ralph: I did indeed meet Edwin.

Tobit: And what ensued?

Ralph: **(Acting out the scene)** He asks why I am come to his castle.

Tobit: And?

Ralph: I explain that I am his elder brother, the true Duke of Chalcot.

Tobit: And he...?

Ralph: Takes me by the hand...

Tobit: By the hand... And...?

Ralph: **(Ruefully)** Throws me to the floor.

Tobit: **(Appalled)** No duke worth the name would have behaved so! And you?

Ralph: I pick myself up and tell him that, will he nill he, I will be Duke.

Tobit: Brave Lord Ralph!

Ralph: I add that I will endeavour to bring to this overcast land a sun-blest rule of kindness and humanity.

Tobit: And Sir Edwin...?

Ralph: Has me cast headlong down a flight of stairs. A long flight... **(feeling his bruises)** of stone stairs. But I pick myself up and leave the castle with head held high.

Tobit: There's my brave Ralph! Now list.

Ralph: You have my ducal ear.

Tobit: **(With a conspiratorial glance around)** There are good men here in the Forest of Arden who yearn to remove the despised Edwin from his seat. When they learn that you are the rightful Duke, why, they will flock to your banner like hounds to the hunting horn.

Ralph: I have no banner. Nor horn.

Tobit: We shall these things obtain. And I assure you, my lord: this willing troop of stout forest folk will carry you across the drawbridge, sit you on the ducal throne, and cast the villainous Edwin...

(Enter Left Three strange women: the Weird Ones. They bring with them a cauldron.)

Tobit: ...into the muddiness of his infernal moat before you can say... **(seeing the Weird Ones)** By Hecate!

Ralph: And then I shall put to right the wrongs inflicted on this unhappy shire by ... **(Following Tobit's gaze and seeing the Weird Ones)** By my troth, who are these?

Tobit: **(Approaching the Weird Ones)** They seem not of this Earth.

(The Weird Ones place the cauldron on what we are to imagine is a fire, and begin to dance and chant, occasionally stirring the brew inside the cauldron. Ralph and Tobit look on, amazed.)

Weird One 1: *Sliver of lizard and nostril of rat,
Tails of water voles, paws of a cat,
Parboiled brains of a mongrel hound,
Throw in some mandrake and stir it around.*

Weird One 2: *Bubbling blood of a rabid hare,
Fetid sweat of a maddened mare,
Liver of a monstrous man-killing boar,
Add viper venom and stir it once more.*

Weird One 3: *Whiskers of dormouse, a pine marten's claw,
Pelt of a she-bear all matted with gore.
Spittle of wolf whisked to pungent froth:
Such the receipt for our devilish broth.*

(The Weird Ones break into a terrifying cackle. Ralph and Tobit look at each other. Tobit clearly wants to edge away but Ralph holds him back, and approaches the Weird Ones.)

Weird One 1: All hail Ralph Atwood, cobbler of Snitterfield!

Ralph: They know who I was.

Weird One 2: All hail, Sixth Duke of Chalcot!

(Ralph and Tobit look at each other in amazement at this announcement.)

Tobit: And who you would be.

Weird One 3: All hail Sir Tobit Penchaunt!

Tobit: (With uneasy lightness, to Ralph) And what for me do these weird ones foresee?

Weird One 3: Thy offspring will be dukes, though thou art none.

(Ralph and Tobit are baffled by this prophecy.)

Tobit: What strange address! Unwed I have no son.

Weird One 3: Time will tell, bewildered mortals.

Weird Ones: (Cackling) Time will tell! Time will tell!

Weird One 3: Now avoid!

Weird One 1: For softly they come,
With no beating drum!

Ralph: Who?

Tobit: (Looking around warily) The Duke's men, I ween.

Weird One 2: Pursuing their prey! Fly! Fly away!

Weird One 3: Grim-visaged Polydore – with acolytes unfriendly.

Weird One 2: And swords and menace!

Weird One 1: Begone, ye men of earth!

Tobit: We heed your warning, grim hags. Come, Ralph: Duke Edwin would chase you from his domain.

Ralph: Let us hence, and gather this army of common folk who will rally to our cause.
(They move Right.)

Ralph: It pleases me that these beings declare me Duke.

Tobit: It perplexes me that they call my progeny dukes. Your son should inherit the title.

Ralph: I have no son.

(Exeunt Tobit and Ralph Right. The Weird Ones remain.)

Scene 2b

(Enter variously men of Duke Edwin's household: Polydore, Maltby, Welton, and Seldun, servant to Polydore. They stride through the audience, perhaps asking questions such as: ***In the name of Duke Edwin we command you each and every one to tell us if you have seen a dangerous vagabond in a yellow jerkin. Have you seen the man who would be Duke? We seek a mischief-maker in red breeches. He wears yellow, the villain. And a feathered cap, the warped clodpole!*** One could even have a miniature portrait to show. They take the stage and look around. The Weird Ones meanwhile hide within their cloaks, becoming indistinct shapes like grey-brown boulders at the side.)

Maltby: *The Place of the Oak.* Shall we rest here awhile, Lord Polydore?

Polydore: Aye, Maltby.

(They take the stage. The Weird Ones shuffle a little Left.)

Seldun: If I would raise the forest in rebellion, here is a fine place to gather my forces.

Polydore: And that is why we are come here. Seldun, go see who may lurk hereabouts; bring them hither that we may question them.

Seldun: My lord. **(Exit Upstage.)**

Welton: They say that in the days of William the Conqueror here was a gathering of rebels.

Polydore: There was; and it will please you to know that my ancestor had them hanged.

Maltby: And this pretender? Shall he be hanged?

Polydore: We live in gentler times, Maltby. The Duke's dungeons now teach good behaviour.

Maltby: What possesses this simple knave to imagine he is the Duke?

Polydore: **(With a shrug)** Madness; for such is the way of madmen. How many come forward asking us to believe that they are mere scullions or weavers or base charcoal burners? Nay, forsooth: your regular lunatic professes himself to be some holy prophet or Great Alexander reborn.

Maltby: But is such a buffoon any danger?

Welton: Certes he is. For presenting himself as the true duke he may foment disorder and provoke garboils amongst the credulous folk of the forest, who will seize any vain cause to discomfit and displace their betters. Why, they would make apes their kings if that they could.

(Enter Seldun Upstage. He holds a play script. Maltby goes over to the Weird Ones and sits on one.)

Maltby: It is strange then that the Duke did let him go. Why, he kicked him from the castle like a mangy cur. What so changed his mind that he would have us pursue the madman?

Polydore: The appearance of the brother – one Adam – gave him peculiar concern. But I know not why. **(To Seldun)** Sawst thou anyone?

Seldun: None, my lord. **(Holding up the script)** But I found this.

Polydore: **(Unimpressed)** A paper.

Seldun: The script of a play, it seems. Would you read?

Polydore: There is enough to be doing in this world, Seldun, without wasting time in the world of a play.

Welton: Let me see. **(Takes the paper and reads with widening eyes.)**

Maltby: (To Polydore) And what of this Adam?

Polydore: I have put Barnaby on his tail.

Maltby: Barnaby is but a boy. Will he be a match for a crafty countryman?

Polydore: The countryman is old and simple; and Barnaby's young legs will bring us swift report. Welton, what matter therein widens your eyes?

Welton: Hear this: **(Reading)** *Thy brother shall be made to yield the crown.* This reeks of treason. Where foundst thou this?

Seldun: **(Pointing Right)** Yonder, by the path.

Welton: Too many trees sheltering too many traitors!

(Maltby rises. They look around warily. Welton spots something Off Right and peers suspiciously into the distance.)

Maltby: Methinks I see eyes between the trees.

Polydore: One is seldom alone in this sanctuary of rebels. Hidden eyes watch everywhere.

(Seldun moves towards the Weird Ones and places his foot on one of them. The other two peer out unnoticed from their cloaks.)

Seldun: I have heard the Duke say he would sleep more easily if he could cut down each traitorous tree.

Maltby: Hard on the guiltless squirrels and loyal owls...

Welton: **(Shouting)** Ho there! You!

(All start in surprise. Enter Right uncertainly Silas, an old man, wearing a grubby cap but a clean face.)

Welton: Hither, churl. Thy name?

Silas: **(Coming forward slowly)** I am called Silas.

Welton: What dost thou here?

Silas: I search, my lord.

Maltby: As do we. What seekest thou?

Silas: A place where I may pursue my humble trade.

Polydore: And what is thy 'humble trade'?

Silas: I am a charcoal burner - removed from my place of burning by order of the Duke; for my fire was in the way of his new hunting chase, Lord Polydore. I now look for a new site.

Polydore: **(Surprised)** How knowst thou my name?

Silas: It was you who brought me the Duke's command, my lord. Do you not recall?

Seldun: Thou canst not expect my lord to remember every peasant he has expelled.

Polydore: **(Squinting at Silas)** But I faintly do. Thou hast washed thy filthy face since then, I ween.

Silas: I have, my lord. Excuse my clean disguise.

Welton: Hast thou, o burner of charcoal... Hast thou met with one who calls himself *Duke*?

Silas: No, my lord.

Welton: Hast thou, perchance, *heard* anything of such an one?

Silas: Why, so I have.

Welton: Ah! And what hast thou heard?

Silas: I have heard many say he hath no human heart...

(The Duke's men show awakened interest.)

Welton: Who says this?

Silas: The folk of the forest and the citizens of Chalcot. He is hated by all...

Seldun: But he is only today come to Chalcot...!

Silas: And a most unworthy son of his father...

(It dawns on the men that Silas is not speaking of the pretender.)

Welton: **(Outraged)** Speakest thou of Duke Edwin?

Silas: ...his father, the Good Duke Alexander... Aye, I mean forsooth Duke Edwin.

(Welton strikes Silas.)

Polydore: Thou art in twofold error, clodpole.

Welton: We ask not about Duke Edwin, forsooth!

Maltby: And thou hast shamelessly slandered our master.

Silas: I say only what I have heard, good sirs. I was taught to tell the truth.

Polydore: Take hence thy truth, churl – or we thrash thee to perdition!

(Welton aims another blow at Silas. who scuttles Off Right.)

Welton: What is this forest coming to if a common charcoal burner so brazenly abuses our duke?

Seldun: What is *Duke Edwin* coming to, one may ask.

(Polydore, Welton and Maltby look with surprise and suspicion at Seldun. He notices their attention guiltily.)

Seldun: Said I that aloud?

(Polydore, Welton and Maltby nod. Seldun moves towards the Weird Ones in confusion.)

Welton: Thou didst

Maltby: And we heard thee.

Polydore: I worry about thee, Seldun.

Seldun: *(Aside, sitting on a Weird One)* So now do I.

(The Weird Ones stir. First the two not sat upon by Seldun begin to move...)

Maltby: Oh look! Behind thee!

(... and then Seldun lets out a yell as his Weird seat moves.)

Welton: The rocks: they stir!

(All back away as the Weird Ones reveal themselves.)

Seldun: My seat is translated into witch! What under Heaven are these?

Maltby: These... these, I trow, are the Weird Ones. Methought they were but the stuff of dreams and fairy tale.

Polydore: What do you here, ye frightful crones?

(The Weird Ones hoot with eerie laughter. The Duke's men back away, alarmed.)

Polydore: Aside from laugh horribly? Speak – if ye can.

Weird One 1: We tell you what ye should know.

Polydore: Then we would know whether you have seen one called Ralph.

Welton: Wearing yellow.

Maltby: And a cap.

Seldun: With a feather.

Weird One 1: What would you with such an one?

Weird One 2: With yellow jacket and green kerchief?

Weird One 3: And red breeches?

Polydore: *That* you need not know.

Maltby: But you should know he is quite mad...

Welton: And calls himself *Duke*.

Weird One 1: No one came hither boasting a title false.

Weird One 2: No one passed who was mad.

Weird One 3: **(Meaningfully)** Perhaps ye left a mad duke in the castle.

Polydore: Nay, he left the castle: we saw him depart...

Welton: Methinks they insult Duke Edwin, my lord.

(Weird Ones give eyebrow-raised looks of innocence. Polydore, angered, gestures to the men to move away Right.)

Polydore: Come, we'll hear no sense from this haggish trio. Let us be about our task: to sweep the forest of noxious weeds this day, and report to the Duke that no pest blight his garden; so if you would be back for supper... keep awake your eyes.

(They move Right, Polydore ahead. Welton pauses and looks back at the Weird Ones thoughtfully; Maltby and Seldun wait for him; exit Polydore.)

Welton: Maltby...?

Maltby: Aye, Welton?

Welton: How knew the Weird Ones of Ralph's green kerchief?

Maltby: We asked them – did we not?

Welton: No – we did not.

Seldun: Weird Ones know things: they have little else to do.

Polydore: **(Off)** Make haste, men! Your supper is at hazard!

(Exeunt Duke's men briskly. Weird Ones wind their way to the centre and look inside the cauldron.)

Weird One 1: See, sisters, how thickens our festering brew...

Weird Ones 2 & 3: Soon will it boil and bubble and foam!

Weird One 1: And watch as our prophecies promptly come true.

Weird Ones 2 & 3: Crookedly wise the cows will come home!

(Exeunt the Weird Ones Left with cauldron and cackles.)

Scene 3

(Enter Right Ursula and the Fool in conversation. Will follows a little behind, somewhat in his own thoughts.)

Fool: A bear?

Ursula: **(With a nod)** A bear, aye.

Fool: **(To Will)** Did you hear that, Will? About the bear?

Will: I did not think there were still bears in this forest.

Fool: It was a long time ago.

Ursula: Some thirty-five years.

Fool: It may have escaped from the castle. The old Duke kept a bear, I know.

Will: Why talk you of bears?

Fool: They say that Duke Edwin had a brother.

Will: **(Facetiously)** The Duke's brother was a bear?!

Fool: Tell Will the tale, good Roland.

Ursula: It is an idle tale...

Fool: Nay, but let Will hear it. He enjoys idle tales.

Ursula: Rumour says that the late Duke Alexander had two sons. Edwin was the younger.

Will: *Was* the younger? Did he catch up with this brother's years?

Fool: *I* am the Fool, Will. Hear out the tale.

Ursula: When the elder was an infant, ere Edwin was born, a dreadful thing happened.

Fool: Enter a bear.

(Will looks around anxiously.)

Fool: Not now, Will. Thirty-five years ago. Proceed, Roland.

Ursula: The boy was with his nurse, taking the air in the forest... **(She breaks off)**

(Pause)

Will: And...?

Ursula: The bodies were never found.

(All look around nervously.)

Ursula: A bear was their doom. That is the tale they tell.

Fool: The Duke himself never speaks of it.

Will: Talk would awaken grief.

Fool: Or fear. Explain, Roland.

Ursula: Father now believes the boy did survive – though the nurse no doubt perished.

Will: I see. And your father believes that he was that little boy - the lost elder son of Duke Alexander?

Ursula: He does. You see, no body was found...

Fool: And thus any Tom, Dick or Harry...

Will: Or Ralph.

Fool: Or Ralph... could claim to be the old Duke's heir. Will: what a perfect play for your pen!

(The Fool acts out the nursemaid, commandeering Will to be the boy.)

Fool: Nurse walks through the forest, holding the boy.

(Fool attempts to pick up Will, who protests.)

Will: Cease! I can play many parts – but not a babe in arms, Fool.

Fool: She hears a sound; and then the boy sees it! He cries out.

(Fool thumps Will, who duly cries out.)

Fool: Nurse shrieks – and runs away with the boy - but trips... **(To Ursula)** Would you play the...?

(Ursula shrugs with disbelief. The Fool indicates that he understands her reluctance.)

Fool: **(Resuming the drama)** The bear approaches – and withal her doom. As for the babe...

Ursula: Enough! It is a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing; but cursed be that idiot who told it to Father!

(Fool, chastened by Ursula's evident distress, stops fooling.)

Fool: Forgive us, good lad...

Will: *Us?*

Fool: We should make sport of your misery.

Will: Indeed.

Fool: Let us - Will and me – go and resume the search. Stay you here meantime and wait for your uncle. Come now, Will. Enough of talk: there is a Ralph to be found!

(Will's eyes roll as the Fool ushers him away. Exeunt Fool and Will. Ursula watches them go with a smile.)

Scene 4a

(Meanwhile, unnoticed by Ursula, Tom, a forest dweller, enters Left. Tom wears a wooden sword and reads a script. He looks up, sees Ursula, looks at her thoughtfully for a moment, and then exclaims in hushed tones...)

Tom: Diana? **(He steps closer.)** Diana!

(Ursula looks up, but does not see Tom, who exclaims more loudly...)

Tom: I have found Diana!

(Ursula turns with a start and, after a struggle, pulls out her dagger and points it threateningly at Tom.)

Ursula: Thou hast found *Roland*, sirrah; and Roland is ready!

Tom: Is this a dagger I see before me?! Away with such a thing, young sir! I am Tom the carpenter and a gentle soul. No call for sharp steel for a peaceable man of wood?

Ursula: Thou hast a sword.

(Tom unsheathes his sword; Ursula backs away.)

Tom: **(Showing the sword)** Not a real weapon: it is wooden – **(throws it up...)** quite safe (...to land blade- downwards into his hand) to be used for our play. **(He scratches at a splinter left by the sword in his hand.)**

Ursula: Play?

Tom: The play our company - *The Artisan Actors* – is to rehearse here. A pretty spot for acting, is it not?

Ursula: **(Nods and smiles, sheathing her dagger)** Forgive my caution: I am young and alone.

Tom: If that be your caution, well I should not care to feel your aggression!

Ursula: But wherefore called you me *Diana*. You see I am a man.

Tom: A very young man: more a boy, I should say. Our play needs a boy to play Diana – and you could be she. I can make you a bow and quiver. I am a carpenter, you see.

Ursula: Thanks, good Tom; but I am already in a play...

Tom: Oh? What is your play?

Ursula: Mine own story. It is still being written – I am not sure it yet has a title.

Tom: May you not be in two plays? And our play is already written - by Old Nick himself.

Ursula: The Devil is the author?!

Tom: Nay, Nick Mallow! He has written a fine play for our company: *The Feast of Thyestes*.

Ursula: Feast? That reminds me: I have not breakfasted to-day.

Tom: **(Darkly)** If I told you what was in the feast you would quickly lose your hunger. **(Shaking his head)** For it is a pagan play, full of direst deeds. **(Brightly)** But your Diana will brighten it.

Ursula: If I be in your play, let me not play a woman's part.

Tom: Diana is no woman: she is a goddess. Would you not enjoy being a goddess?

Ursula: I'll enjoy nothing ere I find my errant father.

Tom: You have lost your father?

(Ursula nods sadly.)

Tom: Here in the forest?

(Ursula nods again.)

Tom: The Forest of Arden is a large place to lose a father. Was he perchance wearing yellow and red...?

Ursula: **(Eagerly)** Aye! And a cap...

Tom: **(Nodding)** With a feather.

Ursula: **(With high excitement)** In appearance an older me... Why, you have seen a man so attired, good carpenter Tom?

Tom: **(After a pause)** No.

Ursula: **(With sudden disappointment)** Oh.

Tom: I met a stranger who asked me had I seen a man in yellow and red.

Ursula: My Uncle Adam, I trow.

Tom: **(Looking closely and doubtfully at Ursula)** Uncle? This man resembled you in no wise.

Ursula: People do say we are unlike, tis true. Where saw you him?

Tom: **(Pointing Left)** That way: close by the castle.

Ursula: I wonder why he is not yet returned hither.

Tom: Well, while you wait let me show you the play. **(Taking out a script)** Now I am Atreus, a Greek prince...

(Tom and Ursula pursue their own lines of thought. Ursula edges Left; Tom is unaware she is not listening.)

Tom: And I offer you – *Diana*, I mean: I offer Diana the finest of my flock.

Ursula: I should go see.

Tom: If she will help me become King...

Ursula: Something may have befallen him. **(She moves Left.)**

Tom: ...rather than my brother, Thyestes.

Ursula: Fare you well, Tom. Perhaps I shall be in your play if mine own endeth well. **(Exit Left.)**

Tom: **(Wittering on, unaware that Ursula has left)** Now my brother is played by Perkin Bagpot. I know what you are thinking: Perkin and Tom look in no wise alike. Well, nor do you resemble your uncle. And my wife Aerope is played by Harry Pint; and Harry – no offence intended, but Harry doth not resemble my wife the leastest! Now you'll be wanting to know where you come in the play. Well stand where you are and I shall read the lines where I offer you a sacrifice.

(Reading from his script) *O goddess of the silver bow,
Immortal huntress, chaste Dian,
Who hauntst the hills and silly vales,
A sacrifice to thee I'll make,
To thee a sacrifice most fit...*

Scene 4b

(Enter Right Nick Mallow and Huw Powys. Mallow has a letter tucked into his belt and a bag with his script and a golden fleece. Powys has a Welsh accent. In this scene all the players have scripts – except Draper, who has to share or look over shoulders.)

Mallow: Ho there, Tom! In good time for rehearsal!

Tom: Ah, good day, Nick Mallow! And to you, Huw Powys!

Powys: How now, Tom. Who were you talking to?

Tom: Diana. **(Looks around)** Gone? Diana stood here I swear but one minute past.

(Powys and Mallow exchange concerned looks.)

Powys: Diana is not real, look you, Tom: she is but a name in our play...

Mallow: Who appears not – as we have no boy to act the part.

Tom: You are mistaken. *Roland* will take the part, once he has found his uncle.

Powys: **(Shaking his head)** You have spent too much time alone, Tom.

Tom: You must write Diana some lines, Nick Mallow. Roland will play the part well, I trow.

Mallow: There is no time to be writing more, Tom. Let us have right the lines already writ. Why, Diana haunts not *silly vales*...

Tom: (Checking his script) *Immortal huntress, chaste Dian,
Who hauntst the hills and...*

Mallow: *Sylvan*... It means woody.

Tom: *...sylvan vales,
A sacrifice to thee I'll ...* **(Noticing the letter)** What have you there?

Mallow: A letter. **(Coily)** A most important...

(Enter noisily Right Jack Draper and Harry Pint. Pint has a script.)

Draper: Ho there, friends!

Mallow: Here's Jack! And Harry Pint!

Draper: Not too late, bully Mallow?

Mallow: Nay, you come betimes. Is Perkin with you?

Pint: One minute he was, then he was not.

Powys: Most Perkinlike!

Mallow: What is the rogue up to?

Powys: No good, if I know Perkin. And I do.

Draper: He saw the Duke's men abroad – and he melted away. Perkin likes not the strong arm of the Duke.

Mallow: Well, let us nevertheless rehearse Perkinless. Forward, Tom, and speak like the prince you are.

(Tom comes forward, trying to act the prince. Each time he opens his mouth to declaim someone speaks.)

Tom: ...

Pint: Aye, let us be rehearsing.

Tom: ...

Mallow: Do *you* know your words, Harry Pint?

Pint: Not so well that I can be doing without the script, Master Mallow.

Tom: ...

Mallow: And you, Huw Powys?

Powys: Almost pat, I am proud to say.

Tom: ...

Powys: And if I forget, well then I can versify *extempore*, look you.

Draper: Pray you do not make up your lines, Huw! for in our last performance you extemporised a grave and noble tragedy into a rib-shaking comedy. Two young lovers took their lives in a tomb – **(with a shudder as he remembers)** and the audience sobbed with laughter.

(Tom will wait no more and launches into his speech. During Tom's speech Draper raises his hand and speaks with Mallow. Pint goes Left and sits to learn his lines. It is important that this scene maintains pace and energy.)

Tom: **(As Atreus)** *O goddess of the silver bow,
Immortal huntress, chaste Dian,
Who hauntst the hills and silly vales...*

Mallow: What is it, Jack?

Draper: Someone's taken my script.

Tom: *A sacrifice to thee I'll make,
To thee a sacrifice most fit...
The finest of my flock... (As himself, checking his script) Is it finest?*

Draper: Have you one spare?

Mallow: **(Cross)** Again, Jack Draper! Nay, I have no more. You must be sharing.

Tom: Aye, marry, it is *finest*. *The finest of my flock I'll give...*

(Tom continues haltingly with his lines. Draper goes Left and shares Pint's script as both learn lines.)

Tom: *As token of my reverence
And hoping thou wilt aid my ... (checking his script) ...cause.*
(As himself, holding up his script) I have mine.

Mallow: Well, Tom; but we must all try without scripts.

(Powys makes a point of throwing aside his script – unwisely as it turns out.)

Mallow: Now Huw, you as Chorus introduce the next scene when Atreus looks for a fitting sacrifice.

Powys: **(As Chorus, trying to do without script)**
*The son of Pelops, Atreus, has vowed
To... (He looks over Tom's shoulder at the script.) sacrifice the finest of his
flock
To win Diana's favour and support.*

(Tom acts out Atreus approaching his flock. Powys follows him, furtively reading Tom's script.)

Powys: *And when with ready knife he comes to where
Together graze his white-wool ewes and lambs
He finds amidst the flock a lamb of gold... (Out of character, with sudden
eagerness) May I be the lamb?*

Mallow: What, Huw?

Powys: May I play the lamb with the golden fleece?

Pint: **(Looking over with interest)** I should like to see Huw's Lamb!

Mallow: Nay, you are the Chorus.

Powys: I could learn both the parts. The lamb will not be saying much, I trow.

Pint: But a baa or two. Huw could baa *extempore*, and would do it well, methinks.

(Powys gets down on all fours and gambols as best he can.)

Powys: Baa! Baa!

Mallow: Nay, Huw, have done! You are too large to play a lamb of any colour. **(Taking from his bag a fleece)** All we need is this fleece.

(Powys meanwhile sensibly retrieves his script and finds his place.)

Mallow: Now Atreus sees the lamb off stage...

Tom: (As Atreus, looking Off) *But what is this I yonder see
A lamb with fleece of gold? Should I
Surrender such a treasure? Nay!
I'll have the lamb first shorn and then
I'll make the sacrifice I vowed.*

Mallow: Good, Tom. You fetch the fleece **(passes the fleece to Tom)**. Now the scene where you present the fleece to your wife – that's you, Harry.

Pint: (Stands but stays where he is.) Ready.

Mallow: Come on then, Aerope: walk grandly across the stage like the queen you are.

(Pint tries to walk grandly across the stage like the queen he is meant to be. Pause.)

Mallow: And say your lines, pray you.

Pint: (As Aerope, looking down at his script)
Abominable! Monstrous!
Most foul and bloody sight...!

Powys: Nay, you have there the wrong page.

(Powys sorts out Pint's script.)

Pint: *Ah what delightful creature hast thou there?*

(Tom stares at Pint.)

Mallow: Your line, Atreus.

Tom: I am making a pause. For the better drama.

(Pause)

Mallow: There is no call for a pause here. You must go straight on with your...

Tom: (As Atreus, briskly interrupting)
Aerope, take this queen, my dearest fleece.

Powys: (Correcting) Take this fleece, my dearest queen!

Tom: (As Atreus) *And do thou guard it well from envious eyes;
For 'tis too precious far to give away.*

Pint: (As Aerope) *I shall, my lord – I shall this treasure keep
Secure from undeserving hands.*

(Pint takes the fleece and drops his script. Tom picks up the script, hands it to Pint, who then drops the fleece.)

Mallow: (With despairing head in hands) Chorus? Tell us of Aerope's unfaithfulness.

Powys: (As Chorus) *But secretly Aerope loved... (sees Bagpot approaching Right; as himself) ...*
Perkin Bagpot!

(Enter Right Perkin Bagpot. He has a poacher's bag, containing his script and with evidence of illegal game.)

Bagpot: (As Thyestes, histrionically) *My dear Aerope...!* (As himself, casually) Forgive my lateness.
The Duke's men are ahunting: methought it best to give them room.

Draper: Maybe they hunt you, Perkin. Did you lately aught unlawful?

Bagpot: Not that they would know. Nay, from what I overheard they seek a madman.

Powys: They will soon find one. There be no lack of madmen in the forest.

Pint: What if they find us here assembled? Will they suspect aught?

Powys: And have us arrested?

Draper: And thrown into the castle dungeon...?

Pint: With rats for company? **(With a shudder)** Rats like me not.

Mallow: Nay – they will do no such thing.

Draper: Why so sure, Nick Mallow?

Mallow: They know what we are about. **(Holding up the letter)** See this letter: it is from Lord Polydore...

Pint: Who?

Mallow: Lord Polydore is the Duke's chamberlain. He has a message for our company.

Tom: Read it. We are now gathered one and all.

(Mallow unfolds and holds up the letter with a ceremonial flourish. As he opens his mouth to read aloud he sees Silas, who enters Right. Draper also sees him; the rest are facing the other way.)

Draper: One and all - and one more.

Mallow: Silas?

(All turn round to see Silas, who nods in affirmation of his identity.)

All: Silas?

Silas: **(Touching his cap)** Masters.

Mallow: Silas, thou art transformed. What has happened to thee?

Silas: Something dreadful, Nick Mallow.

Bagpot: You have had a wash?

(Silas nods sadly.)

Mallow: Well, it is good to see your face, Silas. Tell us more.

Silas: I see you are happily busy, and mine is a sad tale.

Pint: **(Turning to Mallow)** And we have a letter to hear.

(Silas begins to walk slowly and sadly away. Mallow frowns at Harry.)

Mallow: Nay, stay thou, Silas. We are thy forest friends.

(As if quoting some famous lines)

*For thee to leave at last thy cherished fire
And home bespeaks misfortune cruel and dire.*

Silas: **(Returning, also apparently quoting)**

*The flames that year on year so warmly winked
Are now by Edwin's cold command extinct.
Where once there was my glowing pile, the ground*

Is now o'er-chased by careless horse and hound.

(All now consider Silas with commiseration.)

Bagpot: The Duke has had thy fire extinguished and thee, poor man, uprooted.

Silas: And now I seek a new position.

Pint: A new occupation? Wouldst thou be apprentice to one of us?

Silas: A new position... for my fire.

Mallow: Ah... But Silas, this is a place of assembly and sport. A reechy fire would not be welcome to the good folk of this part of the...

Silas: **(Trudging miserably away)** I understand... No call for words more. I shall be looking elsewhere – if any come asking for charcoal. Or for Silas – though that be not likely.

Bagpot: Nay, rest thee here awhile, good Silas! We will help thee find another place for thy burning.

Mallow: And meantime take the chance given thee by thy enforced unemployment to share the company of the Artisan Actors, thou solitary soul, and watch us rehearse *The Feast of Thyestes*.

Silas: That is kindly spoken, Huw.

Draper: And could we not find him a part in our play, Nick?

Mallow: A fine suggestion, Jack Draper. What sayst thou, Silas?

Silas: I could not be in a play.

Powys: Why not, Silas?

Tom: We are but mechanical men – not quality players.

Draper: If we can...

Silas: I cannot read.

Powys: Ah.

Silas: But if there be a part with no lines... One who is to tend a fire, perchance?

Bagpot: Well there is a ... a *feast* in our play...

Silas: Why then I could be the cook.

(All exchange looks, half amused, half uncomfortable.)

Pint: If thou hast the stomach to cook a dinner of...

(Mallow discreetly shakes head at Pint.)

Silas: A dinner of what, Harry Pint?

Mallow: **(Interrupting briskly)** Aye, play the cook, good Silas! And we must quickly cook our play. When you hear this letter...

All: **(Reminded of the letter)** The letter! The letter!

Silas: **(To Powys, unnecessarily)** I cannot read letters.

Powys: Master Mallow will do the reading. Eventually.

Mallow: When you hear this letter you will know why we must work speedily.

All: **(Variously)** Read the letter! Read the letter!

Mallow: **(Reading the letter)** *To Master Nicholas Mallow and the Company of Artisan Actors...*

Tom: **(Proudly)** That is us! We are the Artisan Actors!

Powys: So we are Tom: we do know.

Draper: Peace! Let us hear the letter!

Mallow: *We thank you for your offer to put on a play for the entertainment of the Duke and his Court at Chalcot Castle...*

(Pause; all are tense and still.)

Mallow: *...and we are pleased to invite you to perform...*

(Cheers as the company realise that it is good news)

Mallow: *We are pleased to invite you to perform your play, videlicet 'The Feast of Thyestes', on Whitsunday for the pleasure and entertainment of the Duke and all the court.*

(More cheers; Huw throws Silas' cap into the air – discreetly wiping his hand thereafter.)

Mallow: *Bring this letter to the Castle in the afternoon as warrant and passport for your entrance and cordial welcome.*

Powys: Do not you be losing the letter then, Nick Mallow!

Draper: Nay – or we shall not be admitted.

Mallow: **(Reproachfully)** Saith Jack Draper, script-loser general! **(Resumes reading)** *You shall perform your play on the dais in the Great Hall between three and four o'clock in the afternoon. Cakes and ale will be provided, if you be sober and virtuous.*

(Louder cheers)

Mallow: **(Sternly)** If you be sober and virtuous! **(Resumes reading)** *On behalf of His Grace Sir Edwin de Luce, Duke of Chalcot... Lord Joshua Polydore, Chamberlain. Well, masters, is this not good news?*

(All concur with happy murmurs.)

Tom: We are to play before the Duke!

Pint: In the castle!

Powys: With cakes and ale – if we be virtuous.

Mallow: But Whitsun is **(slowly and deliberately enunciated)** to-morrow!

(General alarm. Mallow looks meaningfully around. With worried expressions the players look at their scripts.)

Mallow: And we need to know our lines – scriptlessly.

Powys: Why did the Lord Polywhatever invite us only now?

Draper: Lords know not how much preparation is needed for a play.

Mallow: But *we* do. And we are not prepared, are we? **(He puts the letter down on the stump.)** If we take the stage...

Tom: Or the dais.

Mallow: Or the dais - with a stumbling show and the whole court watching, then we were invited no more to play at the castle.

Pint: And Sir Edwin may throw us into the stocks before you can say 'What's my line?'

Tom: True, Harry Pint: that is the Duke's way.

Powys: Or into the castle dungeon...

Draper: With the rats!

Bagpot: I do not like the dungeon of any place.

Pint: I do not like the rats of any place.

Mallow: (Emphatically) Therefore, masters: LEARN... YOUR... LINES!

(Bagpot promptly makes a big show of intense learning, and goes wandering about the stage, mumbling to his script. The others swiftly follow Bagpot's lead, and the whole stage is filled with a general and simultaneous mumbling of lines as the actors, consulting scripts, roam around individually. Silas mimes busy cooking. Mallow throws up his hands in disbelief; and finally breaks through just as the actors are finishing the lines below.)

Tom:} (Together, in role) *But what is this I yonder see
A lamb with fleece of gold? Should I
Surrender such a portent? Nay!
I'll have the lamb first shorn and then
I'll make the sacrifice I vowed.*

Bagpot:} *Then if the gods ordain with portent clear
That I must yield to their divine decree,
To Atreus then do I resign the crown;
And thus I leave Mycenae to her fate.*

Powys:} *His nephews, o the wickedness! he killed,
And had them cooked and served up as a feast.*

*Then at this dreadful crime the Sun himself
Did hide his face and light from sin-stained Earth...*

Pint:} (To Bagpot) *A treasure that can win
For thee the crown of rich Mycenae town!
And when thou ownst this fleece thou'lt have the crown
And (what is more) thou'lt have me as thy queen.*

Draper:} (Looking over Powys' shoulder) *And may the
gods above protect us well
From any wicked purposes inside!
And may the House of Pelops no more see
The dark and sordid deeds that scar our past!*

Mallow: **(Loudly)** Peace, peace! Not now! Con your words later - at home!

(All mumble to a halt.)

Mallow: Now: from where Aerope plots with Thyestes.

(Powys, Pint and Bagpot come to the centre; Draper learns lines; Silas asks sporadically for help to follow the plot.)

Powys: (As Chorus) *But secretly Aerope loved Thyestes
Her husband's brother, whom she would make King.*

(Meanwhile exit Tom Upstage; Powys joins Draper Left, learning lines and talking *ad lib.* to Silas.)

Bagpot: (As Thyestes) *My dear Aerope, what a crafty scheme!*

Mallow: Nay, do not call it crafty before you have heard it.
Speak, Aerope.

Powys: (To Silas) There are two brothers, and they both want to be King.

(Pint as Aerope takes the fleece from Mallow.)

Pint: (As Aerope) *Belov'd Thyestes!*

Bagpot: (As Thyestes) *Sweet Aerope fair*

Pint: (As Aerope) *See what treasure I thee bring!*

Bagpot: (As Thyestes) *A fleece
Of golden hue!*

Silas: Why such a fuss over a fleece?

Pint: (As Aerope) *A treasure that can win
For thee the crown of rich Mycenae town!
And (what is more) thou'lt have me as thy queen.*

Powys: Listen. It will come clear.

(Bagpot takes the fleece.)

Bagpot: (As Thyestes) *A fleece to win a crown?*

Silas: It is not come clear, Huw.

Powys: They will play a trick on Tom. Watch now.

Pint: (As Aerope) *Now hear my plan.*

(Aerope whispers to Thyestes, who nods and grins with delight. Aerope then looks Right, indicating the approach of Atreus, and gives an urgent warning to Thyestes, who hides the fleece behind his back.)

Powys: He will be cheated by Perkin, you see.

Silas: That is Perkin's way.

Powys: Tom thinks his wife has the fleece. But she's given it to Bagpot, look you.

Mallow: And now Atreus returns.

(Pause. All look Right.)

Mallow: (Loudly) Atreus returns!

(Enter Tom Upstage.)

Draper: Now Tom comes.

Tom: (As Atreus, loudly) *Hail, Lord Thyestes.*

Silas: Shall we warn him?

Bagpot: (As Thyestes) *Brother Atreus, hail.*

Tom: *What traffic hast thou with my wife?*

Bagpot: (As Thyestes) *Your wife
Suggests a method strange whereby we choose
The King to be.*

Tom: (As Atreus) *Say on.*

Bagpot: (As Thyestes) *She says the gods
Will choose by giving one of us a sign...*

Powys: You see the trap?

Tom: (As Atreus) *What sign? What portent then will
Heaven send?*

Silas: Where?

Bagpot: (As Thyestes) *Whoever can produce a golden fleece*

Powys: The fleece, look you!

Should reign – and let the other hold his peace.

Tom: (As Atreus) *A fleece of gold's the sign?*

Bagpot: (As Thyestes) *'tis strange, I wot!*

Tom: (As Atreus) *Yet gods may send what signs they please.*

Bagpot: (As Thyestes) *Most true.*
Then let us swear that he who can bring forth
A golden fleece will be the king.

Tom: (As Atreus) *I swear!*

Silas: Oh, Tom thought he had the fleece but Perkin did. The cheating scoundrel!

(Atreus and Thyestes clasp hands as in oath. Atreus and Aerope exchange knowing smiles. Then Thyestes produces from behind his back the golden fleece. Tom at first forgets to look amazed. Then he remembers – with ludicrous pop-eyed histrionics.)

Draper: It is but a play, Silas.

Bagpot: (As Thyestes) *The gods thus show Thyestes should be King!*

(Tom quivers with rage; and then forgets his line. Exit Upstage Thyestes.)

Silas: Wicked viper!

Mallow: (Prompting) *Aerope, this is thy gross treachery!*

Tom: (As Atreus but flatly) *Aerope, this is thy gross treachery.*

Mallow: With bitter anger, Tom.

Tom: (As Atreus, with extra bitterness and anger) *Aerope, this is thy gross treachery!*

Mallow: And now Atreus storms off to the side; Aerope goes after.

Pint: (As Aerope, going after Atreus) *My lord, thou canst not think I am to blame.*

Mallow: Remember your anger, Atreus.

Silas: She lies!

Tom: (As Atreus, spitting with remembered anger) *To thee I gave the fleece; he has it now.*
To me, thou jade, there is no mystery.

Mallow: And Atreus dismisses his wife with some rough gesture...

(Tom dismisses Pint with a backward flick of his hand. Unfortunately with this gesture his hand comes smartly into contact with Pint's face.)

Silas: Ouch!

Powys: It is but acting.

Pint: (Out of character – inasmuch as he was ever in – and with apparently genuine pain) *Yow! That hurt!*

Tom: (As Atreus) *Is it not monstrous that my wife and brother*
Stole the fleece and eke my rightful crown?
Will any god above avenge this wrong! (As himself) Are you hurt?

Mallow: Your cue, Jack.

(Draper sidles towards Tom, who appears not to notice him.)

Powys: Jack is gone to be Mercury.

Silas: Wherefore?

Tom: (As Atreus) *Or do the gods care nothing for my woes?*
(Draper coughs softly. Tom stares forward with a dead expression. Draper coughs again, more loudly. Tom turns.)

Powys: To help Tom be King.

Silas: That is good of him.

Mallow: A god needs not cough to command attention.

Draper: It would help if I looked like Mercury.

Mallow: We shall get you your trappings, Jack – but let us first hear your lines. Elaborate costume will not amend poor performance. Give him his cue, Atreus.

Tom: *(As Atreus) Or do the gods care nothing for my woes? (He turns and looks at Draper with affected astonishment.) Is this a god I see before mine eyes?*

Draper: *(As Mercury) O son of Pelops, Atreus, I come From... (As himself) Whence come I? A script...*

Mallow: *(Losing patience rapidly) From high Olympus at the will of flaming Jove! (He flings down his script and strides away - a temperamental director in a tantrum.)*

Draper: Pray you, be not angry, Master Mallow. I will have my lines pat ere long. Nick Mallow...?

(Awkward pause as Mallow paces in a circle of dumb frustration, then sits Right in despair.)

Tom: *(Delicately) Shall we resume rehearsal, Master Mallow?*

(Mallow springs up with gritted purpose. He gives Draper his own script.)

Mallow: Proceed! *(To Powys and Silas, sternly) Behind a tree, if you wish to talk.*

(Chastened the players now perform with noticeably greater proficiency. Silas and Powys hold their peace.)

Draper: *(As Mercury) Thy brother shall be made to yield the crown.*

Tom: *(As Atreus) O Mercury, how will this be?*

Draper: *(As Mercury) This wise.
Today the Sun will halt his westward course
And turn his horses back towards the East.*

Tom: *(As Atreus) What sayst thou? Can the Sun go backwards?*

Draper: *(As Mercury) Aye –
Since Jove commands; this portent will be seen
As proof that Heaven disapproves the theft
By which Thyestes took Mycenae's crown.*