

KNOWLEDGE WORKINGS THEATER PRESENTS

# The Jester's Wife



WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY

T.J. ELLIOTT

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By T.J. Elliott

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# THE JESTER'S WIFE

**By T.J. Elliott**

## **Preface**

A significant debt is owed to the chapter by Juliana Dresvina, *Hagiography and Idealism: St. Dymphna of Gheel, An Uncanny Saint in Anchoritism in the Middle Ages: Texts and Contexts*, editors Kukita and Innes-Parker (2013)

An equally significant debt for scriptural counseling is owed to Rian Smith of the Abbey Theatre, Leigh Selting, Gifford Elliott, and Marjorie Phillips Elliott.

NOTE: lines ending with this punctuation ...// indicate that the next speaker overrides the end of that line with their own utterance

**The Jester's Wife** premiered September 23rd, 2023, at The Chain Theatre in New York City. Directed by T.J. Elliott, with Technical And Artistic Direction by Gifford Elliott, Rehearsal Assistant Leigh Selting, Set Design Gloria Novi, Costume Design Elena Vannoni, Lighting Design William M. Brown, Sound Design Margaret Montanya, Fight Choreographer Scarlett Yousiff, Stage Manager Kate Gavin, Assistant Stage Manager Alyssa Blake, Executive Producer Marjorie Phillips Elliott and Associate Producers Ed Altman & John C. Elliott

The cast was as follows:

**JESTER** — Steve Weatherbee

**WIFE** — Emma Taylor Miller

**STRANGER** — Xander Jackson

**Characters**

JESTER: a thirty something Irishman

The JESTER's WIFE: a somewhat younger Irish woman

STRANGER: A Black man, impressive physically and of indeterminate age

**Time:**

Early Seventh Century A.D., so-called Dark Ages

**Place:**

A cave in the woods near Gheel, Belgium

*(Under a follow spot STRANGER, a tall Black man garbed as a seafarer with a scabbard and sword, enters from stage left. He turns at center stage to the audience and addresses them.)*

STRANGER

*(Deliberately performative as the new actor he is)* Incipit prologus in fabula nostra. “Dymphna; filiae Regis Hibernia. Qui a Rege patre Virginis persecuti... *(Pauses to look more closely at audience before speaking more casually)* Oh, you don't know Latin. Sorry. That's fine. *(Beat)* Prologue to our play. Dymphna. *(Digressing)* Her name in Gaelic is Damhnait. *(Enunciating sensuously and delightedly)* Dahv-nit. Meaning little deer. In Gaelic. *(Performative)* “Dymphna was a daughter of a King of Ireland, a king who persecuted this Virgin and her confessor holy priest Gerebernus.” “Her father, grieving over his beautiful dead wife, turned his attention and lust upon Dymphna who had inherited her mother's beauty. Having by vow consecrated her virginity to God, to avoid the snares to which she saw herself exposed at home, Dymphna fled with her priest, Gerebernus, the Court Jester, and the Jester's Wife. *(Normal voice)* The Jester's Wife. Name of the play. *(Performative, gaining confidence)* Passing over the sea, she chose her abode at the village of Gheel.” *(Gestures to audience)* “There she served God in retirement and assiduous prayer. But being at length discovered and pursued by those who were the enemies of her chastity, she and Gerebernus were murdered by them. They slew them. Beheaded her because she refused to consent to their brutish passion.” All this according to the *(Enunciating sensuously)* Acta Sanctorum... *(Catches himself)* The Lives of the Saints! *(Shrugs)* “The body of St. Dymphna, the Virgin, rests at the aforesaid village of Gheel, after granting many miracles.” Dymphna flourished in the seventh century. Anno Domini. The Year of our Lord. *(Smiles)* What we refer to as The Dark Ages.

**(BLACKOUT)**

*(Loud shouts and bloodcurdling screams fill the darkness. As the noise outside continues, lights rise revealing a cave's interior with its single entrance stage right. A broom leans against the wall nearby surrounded by a collection of some crude water jars, bowls, and goblets. Slightly to the left, a makeshift shrine to the Blessed Virgin stands with a crude drawing. Center stage, a tripod of stout branches supports a cauldron. There are ashes beneath the cauldron. Further stage left; four pallets stretch with blankets atop them. JESTER, in fool's cap and other professional garb, scrambles inside the cave falling onto its 'floor'. Rising only to fall again, he frantically seeks some hiding place. As shouting outside intensifies, he dives under a blanket on a pallet only to abandon that place to crouch behind the cauldron as the shouts subside)*

JESTER

God! *(Praying)* Where are you, God? Please. Please! Not like that! Not like them. *(Clasps hands to his neck)* The sword! The neck! The head! The blood! Please! *(Beat)* I am not worthy to be a martyr.

*(Scraping at the entrance to the cave has JESTER cower further. As the sound grows louder, he snatches a blanket and wrapping it around him compresses his body behind the cauldron)*

JESTER

*(Whispering)* Please, God, not yet, and not that! The blood!

*(WIFE, in a simple mantle with a black bag on her back and a cap on her head, crawls cautiously in holding a foolscap with ass ears. Looking at it, she flings it aside. She kneels and mouths a silent scream with one fist inside her mouth and the other outstretched above her head, then pounds her fists upon the floor. A rustling in the pile stirs her to rise and look behind her sniffing the air. Noticing the pile that is JESTER, she circles him.)*

WIFE

*(In a male voice)* What have we here? *(JESTER quivers and she kicks him repeatedly)*

JESTER

*(Still beneath the blanket)* Don't cut off my head! Not like them, please! *(WIFE swats his head as he screams leading her to swipe the blanket away and cover his mouth)*

WIFE

*(Whispering and slapping)* Quiet! Why not the head, you cowardly JESTER? Why not remove your empty skull? You...ran away! *(Looks at his face and after a moment hammers him on the head with her fist in a seesaw of blows alternating between covering his mouth with one hand and hitting with the other until eventually he manages to lift both hands away momentarily)*

JESTER

Wife! You live! My prayers were answered.

*(Deliberately, she slaps him three times but covers his mouth muffling his cry)*

WIFE

Can't you be quiet?

JESTER

Can't you stop beating me?

*(She considers this request but then unleashes a rain of blows on his head with one fist while the other covers his mouth. He manages to break away and hold up one of the pallets as protection but drops the ass-ears cap)*

JESTER

Wife! Love of my life! Do not punish me *(Pointing)* for their sins.

WIFE

*(Hissing)* Shut your gob, fool. *(Gestures outside)*

JESTER

*(Slowly lowering pallet and edging towards her)* I know. How horrible! *(Squeezes his head in his hands)* The blood. The head. *(Seeing the other cap, he retrieves it)* Dymphna. Father. Both. Both... dead. That's why I was here. Praying for your deliverance.



WIFE

Really! Not praying for yourself? *(Takes the bag off her back and places it by the cauldron. He puts down the pallet)*

JESTER

No. Well, for both of us. Our deliverance. Together. Always.

WIFE

Both of us? You ran. I turned just as the horrid King firked off Dymphna's head...//

JESTER

We ran. *(Defensive)* Isn't *running* how you got here, dear?

WIFE

Yes, I ran. But your escape 'twas magical. A disappearing act.

JESTER

Magic? Not me. Never! I thought I saw you run to the cave and...  
*(Shouts drive them behind cauldron)*

WIFE

*(Whispering)* Move over!

JESTER

This hides us ill. What should we do, my cherished bride?

WIFE

Go guard the entrance.

JESTER

*(Starts to door then reverses)* What good will guarding do? They have swords. Great huge sharp, very sharp, sharp enough to slice a head off with one swing, swords. Argghhh! *(From one of his pockets, he pulls out a puppet on a stick)* I, in contrast, have only a puppet on a stick.

WIFE

If those sprats from hell are going to kill us anyway, let us now go down fighting. Not do nothing. Like out there.

JESTER

Best not to go down at all, but why go down fighting?

WIFE

For honor? To do the right thing? For the satisfaction in your last thoughts that you sacrificed yourself for your wife?

JESTER

Don't be cross, my cherished. (*Protects herself from her*) But my last thought would be (*Mimes painful death*) 'Argghhh'

WIFE

Ever the JESTER. Nothing changes. (*Ratcheting up her intensity*) May you never be at...//

JESTER

(*Jumps forward and covers her mouth*) Don't curse me! Don't. (*Makes sign of the cross*) We need each other. (*Points*) Curse them. Foist one of your famous maledictions upon those fiends.

WIFE

Famous maledictions? What are you on about? I should hurl curses instead of us going down fighting, you ral?

JESTER

Again, going down fighting seems pointless. (*Dodges her swing*) None of the best martyrs go down fighting. Dymphna didn't.

WIFE

Martyrs? You? A Jester-Martyr? Well, not a hero for sure.

JESTER

Not like they will sing songs of the Jester who went *down* fighting. (*Musing*) Unless as a joke (*Performative*) There once was a Jester named Kite/ who went to his death with a fight. / They sliced off his head/ and he fell down quite dead. So, what was the point of that? (*Smiling looks to his WIFE for reaction*)

WIFE

The last bit doesn't rhyme. What kind of rubbish poem doesn't...//

JESTER

That's the joke. He's dead. Doesn't rhyme. (*Beat*) It's more sophisticated humor.

WIFE

(*Shaking her head in disbelief*) You are — were — Jester to a mad Irish king (*Picks up the ass-ears cap*) who just beheaded his daughter. But you've decided to work sophisticated humor into your act?

JESTER

I'm a Jester. It's what I do. Just can't help the way my brain keeps pumping out new material. Even now.

WIFE

No, you can't help yourself. Or anyone else. (*Edging forward*)

JESTER

What was I supposed to do? (*Mimes the action as he relates this tale*) We are walking back from Chapel and out of the woods the insane King charges with his men with those very sharp swords flashing this way and that...//

WIFE

Very sharp. So you've said. And to thwart such monsters, you must brave their swords, sharp or not, my soft and sorry love. I saw it all. And did nothing. I am amazed that you could see anything while making your salmon's leap into this cave.

JESTER

I saw enough that I got in here... and waited for you to arrive.

WIFE

Waited for me? How did you know they hadn't chocked my head off? (*Pokes him*) I could've been dead. No head like Dymphna. Blood spurting like the spray from a wave on the rocks.

JESTER

Blood! (*Covering his head with his hands*) Oh, don't keep bringing up the blood! (*Uncovering his head*) But... The King wasn't trying to sleep with you though, was he? I mean...I'm not suggesting you would have if he did but...//

WIFE

Oh, you see me safe from the murderous prat because I don't strike his festering fancy? One need not stare at the entrails of a sheep to guess the future plans of our King for all those who fled his kingdom. Two down, two to go.

JESTER

*(Nods painedly)* You're right, my gem. You're right. But that bit about the entrails of a sheep? *Can* you tell the future? *(Tries to embrace her)* I love you no matter what, but...//

WIFE

*(Withdrawing)* What are you doing? You still haven't answered why you deserted me out there? *(Pushes him)* And don't deny it!

JESTER

Remember how Father Gerebernus — still having a head — told of how Original Sin — our fallen condition — hindered mankind's ability to make good choices. That's why I ran. Original Sin.

WIFE

You're blaming your gobshitedness on Original Sin? The Garden of Eden thing? Adam eating an apple? That's it?

JESTER

Actually, didn't Eve give Adam the apple? Yes, my fallen state led me to run. To survive. *(Kneels)* Penitent. I am, wife.

WIFE

*(Advancing on him at the last moment pushes him over with her foot)* Fine, now do the right thing. *(Hauls him toward entrance)*

JESTER

*(Breaking free)* So, my penance for not getting killed then is to get killed now? A little harsh, acushla. Not exactly three Hail Marys.

WIFE

*(Grabbing him by the arm and pulling him toward the entrance)* I don't want anyone to get killed. I did not want Father Gerebernus to lose his head. I very much didn't want Princess Dymphna to get killed. What I want has never mattered very much and it matters even less today. But we should...face our death or our life and not hide. I see one way out of this cave. *(Seizes broom to push him out the door but as shouting resumes they both shrink back)*

JESTER

*(Whispering)* I think you have the better weapon. *(Pointing)* The broom. I mean, for you, might a broom...?

WIFE

This broom? What would I sweep them away?

JESTER

Couldn't a broom possess certain... powers... in the right hands?

WIFE

*(Staring him down then swatting him)* Start that witching nonsense again, and the sharp end of this broom will fly up...//

JESTER

I would never bring up this... W stuff if we weren't in a life-or-death situation, my doe. And something magic now might...//

WIFE

Life-or-death? Back in mad Damon's mingy castle, each day was life-or-death. This world's ever life-or-death, my bleating bittern.

JESTER

Yet, my doll, so far you have stayed alive. *We* are still alive. Throw off your dod, be happy and rejoice.

WIFE

Happy? *(Smiling mockingly)* Happy, happy, happy! Oh, just tickled while trapped in a smelly cave after witnessing *(Points)* that and still facing the prospect of chopped off head or starving to death!

JESTER

Fair point. There's also those roving Flemish lunatics stumbling in here during the night. I'm scared of them too.

WIFE

*(Waves him away)* Those poor odd souls? We've no need to scurry from them as with the King. Why did we run anyway? *(Drops to her knees)* I did not do what I should have done.

JESTER

Who can say what we should have done?

WIFE

Christ. *(In his face)* Jesus?

JESTER

No need to be testy. I'm asking you who can say what we...//

WIFE

I'm answering your question with what Jesus Christ did say. Our Lord declared: "No greater love than this: that a person would lay down his life for the sake of his friends." I laid down nothing.

JESTER

So, you admit Dymphna was your *friend*? Just yesterday you...//

WIFE

I said she was massively annoying. Yes. But still my friend. A friend who should have had her ears boxed for being so stupid about all this. Staying here instead of... *(Strikes her chest)* Oh, nihil nisi bonum. *(He gapes fearfully)* It means *speaking nothing but good of the dead*? *(Upset)* A poor girl for whom I did *not* lay down my life. How can I abide in God's love now?

JESTER

Abide in God's grace that you survived. To abide we must survive. *(Smiles)* Kind of rhymes. Might be a good start to a...//

WIFE

Survive? In the long run, we are all dead anyway, husband.

JESTER

(*Contemplating*) Now that's *very* good. Long run all dead anyway.  
(*Performative, speaks to his puppet*) Prithee, sir, if in the short run, we are out of breath, what are we in the long run? (*In puppet voice*) In the long run, we are all dead. (*To WIFE in regular voice*) Not bad, eh? I think that one's a keeper.

WIFE

Riddles? Now? Try this one. (*Grabbing his puppet stick speaks to it*) What stands but for nothing, is good but for nothing, says much that is nothing, and facing death still did nothing? (*In puppet voice*) What is a Jester?

JESTER

(*Snatching back his puppet*) You've used that one before, wife. Nothing so useless as a used riddle.

WIFE

(*Louder*) Ah, even more useless than a Jester for a husband? I've yet to solve the riddle of how I fell for that bargain.

JESTER

(*Cups his ear to listen to outside*) Because I help you, my love, to live. And for now... we live! (*Cavorts*) They're gone!

WIFE

(*Listening to outside*) Stop your cavorting. I cannot hear. It is quiet. Will you look now? (*He hangs his head*) Then I will go. (*Starts for outside, but he tackles her and pins her by the shrine*)

JESTER

I beseech you! (*Beat*) In the name of our Blessed Mother. Stay! (*She rolls him over and pins him*) Is life so bad with me you would waste it on a glimpse out there? (*Puts his arms about her neck*)

WIFE

(*Scornfully disentangles*) You are a cute hoor, aren't you? How much longer are we to live anyway? Whether back in Ireland or here in Flanders. (*Takes her black bag and searches in it while sinking down on a pallet, )*

JESTER

One of the reasons the age of exit from this life dips particularly low right now is a dotty fecking King out *there* cutting people's heads off. (*Peers into cauldron*) Yes, starvation is also a possibility. Or getting a fever from one of the brainsick who lurch into this cave from time to time. But that's not *now*. A sharp sword out there means Death now! (*She sighs*) Of course, you, a midwife and healer, are better prepared for death. But I... seeing this... the blood. All I can think is how it will be a tragedy when we do die.

WIFE

A tragedy? We're a tragedy? Bit of an exaggeration there.

JESTER

We know so much and it will all be gone.

WIFE

What do you know besides silly riddles, stale jokes, and... of course, the jump, whistle, and fart?

JESTER

You're very cruel. My riddles — some of which you inspired — are highly regarded. My capering? (*Capers*) Adored by many. The tales I've spun? Well received. I've got barrels of new jokes. All that disappears while our bones bleach in the sun. If the sun ever comes out in Flemish land. (*Pause*) It's just that I don't think I'm going to enjoy being dead. (*Watching WIFE still rummaging*) Bad attitude, but how could I be happy being dead?

WIFE

I would be happy.

JESTER

Oh, yes, you! Religious reasons? Resurrection? Get rid of the nasty evil body? Go to heaven? You will be happy being dead?

WIFE

(*Still rummaging*) No, I'd be happy with *you* being dead.

JESTER

(*Smiling weakly at the joke*) That's funny. Very good. Happy when I'm dead. Still trying to take over as Jester, my beauty?



WIFE

Women can't be Jesters. Women aren't funny. Or so they say.

JESTER

I never said that. You, my dear one, were funny from the start. Looking at you naked in that river our first afternoon and what did you say? 'Why don't you paint a picture? It will last longer?'

WIFE

I never did, ya fool.

JESTER

Yes, that wit fired my desire. As did your bosom, of course. And bottom. It's good for a Jester to have a witty wife. With breasts.

WIFE

*(Rising)* Are the breasts why a woman cannot be a Jester?

JESTER

No. Breasts can be *very* funny. It's the Church says God doesn't like funny women. Maybe he's still sore at Eve passing that forbidden apple gambit off as a big prank.

WIFE

Eve again? With men talking about women, everything seems to go back to that story about Eve. We never got her side, did we?

JESTER

Fair point. *(Wistful)* Wouldn't we have a great old chat with Father Gerebernus about something like this?

WIFE

*(Wistful)* Yes. Father and his chats were lovely. He had the gift of the gab. Silver tongue. Till those fiends stopped his voice.

JESTER

Hard to talk without a head.

WIFE

And the good Father could talk the hind legs off a donkey. *(Kicks cauldron)* No food. We cannot stay here forever. We must go...//

JESTER

The hind legs off a donkey. An ass. There's a good riddle there.

(Performing)

*Our Lord rode upon it.*

*We all sit on it.*

*Some (Smirking and wiggling) find joy in it.*

*None wish to be called it. What is it?*

*(In puppet voice) An ass!*

*(Regular voice) That's a keeper. Have to remember that one.*

WIFE

Who are you making new riddles for? You are an out of work Jester who abandoned his job for the petty King of Oriel to help his daughter escape. *(Brandishes ass-cap and edges JESTER toward the entrance)* Riddle us out of here, my blowzy boy!

JESTER

What wears bells that never ring? *(Puppet voice)* A dead Jester. Do you not fear death? You see lots of it. Me? Closest I come to death is as the entertainment at the wake right before the old biddies do the Coronach, that off key keening.

WIFE

The Coronach. The funeral song. 'Twas none sung for Dymphna.

JESTER

*(Agitated)* If we go out there and get butchered, there will be no caterwauling keeners to sing for us the ullaloo. *(Mimes the contortions of the keener and sings)* Ullaloo! Ullaloo.

WIFE

*(Smacking him)* I know not to jest at death. Take off those bells!

JESTER

*(Going to entrance removes cap)* They've gone. I haven't heard anything for... *(More shouts from outside, he jumps away)*

WIFE

*(Disgusted)* If you won't go out, then at least let's pray. Until...

JESTER

Death comes. (*Shaking head*) I'll give it a go. Power of prayer and all that. (*As they kneel, JESTER moans*) Ahvay MahReeYa.

WIFE

This isn't a performance.

JESTER

Don't kid yourself. There's a lot of prayers going up there and I want mine to be noticed.

WIFE

Stick to silent prayer.

JESTER

Silent?

WIFE

Contemplation. "Abide in me, and I in you." Jesus? Gospel?

JESTER

Right. Dymphna prayed out loud. And Father prayed very loudly.

WIFE

And they got their heads sliced. Be silent, you jackeen.

(*WIFE prays silently; JESTER fidgets*)

JESTER

(*Whispering*) Excuse me, but if it's silent, how does God hear?

WIFE

All-knowing God knows what's in our heads. And hearts.

JESTER

Oh, don't say that! I've always hated that idea. (*Winces*) Terrible!

WIFE

Why? What's in your head?

JESTER

*(Defensive)* Nothing in my head. Nothing.

WIFE

*(Stares then shrugs)* Too easy. Just pray. *(Returns to her silent prayer as he bows his head)*

JESTER

*(Whispering)* Are you praying to be spared or for a good death?

*(Shouts and groans from outside but fainter)*

WIFE

I'm praying to touch the silence of God. To calm my soul. *(Addressing his seeming incomprehension)* How else would we hear God, know His will, but in silence?

JESTER

*(Amazed)* Cushla machree, you hear God when you pray?

WIFE

Not so far today, but if you would shut... *(Still fainter shouts)*

JESTER

*(Whispering)* Would God interpret my asking for salvation as wanting to get to heaven sooner? Exit vale of tears. Because as previously noted, I'm not eager to go. Will God understand that my prayer is a very specific request to *not* be beheaded?

WIFE

This is just silent prayer. As previously noted.

JESTER

And then he guesses what it is you want? Kind of a game?

WIFE

I'm just trying to get closer to God. To feel His presence while he is both hidden and near. I don't think God cares what I want.

JESTER

Ah, you've given up on surviving all this. Trying to get in good with him. Clever move. Have to contemplate on that a bit...//

WIFE

Contemplate? You?

JESTER

Contemplate, yes. Weighing how we are here... then... zip, we are not. Unhere. Philosophical things. Just part of the Jester job.

WIFE

As if hearing Dymphna's murderers yelling like banshees isn't torment enough, I must listen to you claim you're philosophical? By a country mile, you are the least philosophical person I know.

JESTER

A country mile? How many philosophical people do you know?

WIFE

More than a few who outdo you. There was Father Gerebernus. You're not claiming to be in his class now, are you?

JESTER

No, Father was top-notch in the old philosophy. No doubt. But that leaves me second, doesn't it? And (*Points outside*) now first.

WIFE

What about Dymphna? May she rest in peace.

JESTER

You old hypocrite. You used to tell your *friend* Dymphna when she still had a head on her shoulders that if she shook it too hard we could hear the rocks rattle. Now she's philosophical?

WIFE

I'm just saying that even Dymphna was *more* philosophical than you. Dymphna took the time to think about some things. Not particularly well, but she put in the hours. How do you spend your time? Practicing your famous jump, whistle, and fart? Stealing soda bread from the kitchen? Talking to the hounds?

JESTER

(*Ignoring her insults*) So, that makes me the third most philosophical person you ever knew.

WIFE

What do you know about philosophy? What do you know about seeking truth? About death? About rightness? About...//

JESTER

Truth is the whole game for a Jester. But in jokes, not in deep thinking screeds, missy. As Father would say, the Jester holds a mirror to his prince to show what's true. But with wit. Making people laugh you tell the truth in a way that others cannot.

WIFE

Oh, so then you told that maggot of a King, the incestuous worm, the shitty hound, the *truth* about the foulness of wanting to sleep with his daughter?

JESTER

A thousand times, I told him. But the Devil was in his mind...//

*(A bloodcurdling, darker scream is heard)*

JESTER

Did that sound like King Damon? I think it was.

WIFE

When did you ever hear King Pus-face scream like that?

JESTER

When his Wife died. Dymphna's mother. That's when he went bonkers. And this *(Points outside)* all began. That scream... Maybe the locals took revenge on him for Dymphna and Father Gerebernus. The villagers adored Dymphna even those cracked ones that kept popping into the cave at night looking for food.

WIFE

What's not to adore about a woman who overpays for bony fish in gold coins with her father's likeness on them?

JESTER

True enough. *(Shakes head)* Those gold coins. You did tell her those blasted coins might give us away. *(Snaps fingers)* Maybe someone killed the King thinking he has more gold coins. God be praised for a greedy murderer when you need one.

WIFE

Well, that someone wasn't you.

JESTER

Again (*Lifts puppet*) What I had. (*Mimes sword*) What they had.

(*Scream is heard again*)

WIFE

(*Listening*) Could... could these Flemish peasants kill the King?

JESTER

I have seen a few hulking degenerates about the village, but... Not easy going up against a King with an enormous broadsword shouting how blood would gush like a crimson waterfall.

WIFE

Maybe someone snuck up behind him and returned the favor scissoring off his own gnarly head.

JESTER

No, then that someone gets killed by one of King Damon's soldiers. These peasants didn't look *that* stupid.

WIFE

Maybe one of his knaves did the deed. Those slaving apes of Damon's refused to kill Dymphna for him. They don't like him. Did anybody like the King? You could've killed Damon and everyone might have applauded. Those piggish knights might have made you King. (*Beat, then both laugh*) No, that's ridiculous. But they might not have killed you. Or me. But what's the difference if they did kill us?

JESTER

The difference is I'm living. Not dead. And until I'm dead, there's always a chance that I won't die. Not to get too *philosophical*.

WIFE

But no chance that you will avoid dying. (*Grabs him*) With one grand swipe at his sinful head, you could have become legendary by killing the crazy, craving King. Now you are forever known as the Jester who stood there and did nothing. And I always will be known as the Jester's Wife who also did nothing.

JESTER

*(Slipping her grasp)* You've always been known as the Jester's Wife so there's really no change for you.

WIFE

Before marrying you, I was not known as the Jester's wife.

JESTER

God save us, you weren't known at all. I mean, beloved, where you come from was just some stones in a circle. Not a village. Not even a crossroads, just a mucky goat path by the river where I first saw you bathe. Who knew you other than Granny? And the goats. Then we married. And you were the Jester's wife.

WIFE

What is your point?

JESTER

You haven't really lost anything by my failure to do something heroic. You haven't gained much, but you're still enjoying your same Jester's Wife status. As previously noted.

WIFE

Status? A woman's status as wife of the Jester to the petty King of Oriel, a spot in Ireland so piddling no one bothers to invade?

JESTER

It's the skill of the Jester not the size of the kingdom, my good spouse. You don't get quality audiences in the little kingdoms. Have to work harder for that lot.

WIFE

Work harder? Is that what you call doing your jump, whistle, fart for that nasty old king? Hard work?

JESTER

It's jump, fart, and whistle. You cannot get it right after all these years? Dymphna liked my jesting. My mimicry always made her smile. And Father G found me highly amusing. He said so.



WIFE

Your mimicry? Father humored you. Your nun sounds like the drunken miller. The Druid like the nun. The miller like... like you.

JESTER

*(Indignant)* Father humored me? I'm Jester. I do the humoring.

WIFE

*(Shaking her head bitterly)* Priests are aces at the old humoring. Father humored everyone. He humored Dymphna's fantasy.

JESTER

What fantasy was that?

WIFE

The one where she could just stay safely here forever. The fantasy that a woman can ever stop running from a cur like her father.

JESTER

But we did escape. With my clever plan of Dymphna disguised as a Jester, *(Shakes ass-cap)*, the guards were fooled...//

WIFE

Escaped? Into this? Clever plan. If she wouldn't keep running, Dymphna might as well have died back in Ireland.

JESTER

Right. Martyrdom in your own parish is much more appealing.

WIFE

A martyr? *(Covers face with her hands)* Just a poor murdered girl.

JESTER

Poor Dymphna, our beautiful holy princess.

WIFE

Eh? *(Glancing dubiously)*

JESTER

What? She was a beautiful virtuous virgin martyr.

WIFE

Certainly virtuous. I give you that. And definitely virgin. Not that I checked, but she had the look. But beautiful...?

JESTER

What? A comely maiden martyr, vision of loveliness and chastity. Dymphna who loved God so much that she died rather than...//

WIFE

Again with Dymphna a martyr? She died rather than sleep with a demon of a father. Is that a martyr? And what is it with men proclaiming all women martyrs beautiful? Never any homely ones, but the men martyrs get to be bald with bushy beards. What are the odds *every* female martyr has beautiful long flowing hair, glowing eyes, cherub lips, and a knockout figure, but often on the boyish side? This never struck you, my little love?

JESTER

I had never met any martyrs like Dymphna.

WIFE

Oh, you met martyrs like her. Those girls just had no one to tell a good story for them. Girls who threw themselves in the sea or bashed their heads on a rock rather than suffer another night of the Da sneaking neath their blanket.

JESTER

Still, you're very hard. Dymphna was lovely like her Ma.

WIFE

She was cute. *Nihil nisi bonum (Strikes her chest)* Her eyes were amazing bright lights. They captured your fancy.

JESTER

Me? Her Jester? How can you say that? I only have eyes for you.

WIFE

Oh, now there's a good joke. Keeper, that one.

JESTER

I love you more each day.

WIFE

More than what?

JESTER

More than the day before. (*Putting his arms around her*)

WIFE

What was stopping you from loving me that much yesterday?

JESTER

My lack of grace. It's the old Original Sin again. (*She snorts*) I have to earn the awareness of your magnificence, my darling.

WIFE

You should work harder then. Stop dilly-dallying in your appreciation of me. Time may be running out.

JESTER

(*Pulling her closer, she resists*) I'm appreciating you right now.

WIFE

Appreciating me? (*Wailing from outside of "God" and she pushes him away*) Playing the lovebird with vultures circling, you idjit!

JESTER

Perhaps they intend to torture us?

WIFE

By screeching? They've no such subtlety, my sweet simpleton.

JESTER

No, those sounds may be them preparing instruments of torture. The Rack! The Brazen Bull! The Judas Cradle! The Rat in A Bowl!

WIFE

You think they packed all that equipment? Not this lot. And that excrement of a monarch lacks the patience for torture. He needs the immediate gratification of a butchered body.

JESTER

(*Pensive*) Whoever they try to kill first, the other one should run.

WIFE

Run? So they can hunt us like hares. Why?

JESTER

Figure out *where* while running. Run first, destination later. Survive. One of us should survive and tell this story so the world will know what happened today to a princess and a priest.

WIFE

And the Jester and the Jester's wife.

JESTER

Jesters don't get tales told much. And their wives... (*Shrugs*) No shred of us will remain in this cold turvy world. Unless...

(*More wailing of 'God' & 'Demons'*)

WIFE

(*Whispering*) Unless what? What are you jangling about?

JESTER

One morning last week Father and I were saying The Prayer of Saint Patrick. (*Performing*) "*I arise today through a mighty strength...*" (*Regular voice*) All that stuff.

WIFE

(*Impatient*) I know the prayer.

JESTER

And very slowly he says (*Performing*) "*Protected against spells of witches and smiths and wizards."* All the time shooting me one of his grim looks like when he's caught a couple of the servants rutting. So, I says to him, is there something wrong, Father? And he looks me in the eye and says, "When it comes to witches, I know there's good ones and bad ones. A word to the wise."

WIFE

What are you after? Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! The witches guff again?

JESTER

Not me talking but Father. Suspecting... you, my sweet. And I just wondered given our situation if maybe this could be the moment to

reveal the good... W part. If you have it. Just a little pishogue, a tiny spell. And I would never tell...//

WIFE

Where did Father get these ideas? If I was a... what he said, why would I continue to go around as the Jester's Wife? With magic, I could change to a Raven or a Robin. Or disappear.

JESTER

Jester's wife is a good disguise. Who'd think that a Jester would marry a...? Father wasn't the only one with these thoughts. Before we escaped, there were other people whispering.

WIFE

What people? What whispers? Those pinheads in the ringfort? They have less sense than the dogs they lie with every night.

JESTER

They whispered you know things. How to mix potions out of herbs like burdock and coltsfoot and bellflower and foxglove.

WIFE

Coltsfoot? I'd like to put my foot up their ignorant asses. Knowing some herbs to heal folks makes a witch? 'Twas always so. Boneheaded bollocks see fire from the turf light and it becomes fairies. Butter stolen means witches. The wind moans and...//

JESTER

Just telling what others say. Like...that you *see* omens betimes.

WIFE

Omens! (*Laughs bitterly and points outside*) I didn't see *this* coming, or I would've stayed inside the cave today.

*(Screams of 'God ' Demons' come from just outside the cave. JESTER scurries to the pallet. Disgusted, WIFE walks toward the entrance)*

JESTER

*(Listens)* That other shouting didn't sound like Damon. And now I hear nothing. They left. Our prayer was answered. We are spared.  
*(Seeks embrace that she spurns)*

WIFE

So, what do we do now? If spared?

JESTER

We go to what is next. As we always do.

WIFE

And what is next?

JESTER

What is next? We go somewhere else and hope it's warm and not cold, that there is food, not just dirt, that it's safe and not surrounded by head slicing swords.

*(Wailing is heard again and JESTER rushes back from the entrance but WIFE shouts to outside)*

WIFE

*(Loudly)* Devil take you murderous sacrilegious bastards. The next drop of water to quench your thirst — may it scorch your bowels. May blackbirds fly up your ass and out your nose. May you eat and eat and never shit! May your piece fall off from an awful itch and be a bone for a mangy dog. May you die alone.

JESTER

*(After a moment)* Nicely done. Nothing quite like a good string of curses to scare off the bad ones. You got talent for the curses like no one I ever heard. When you curse someone...//

WIFE

I am not a witch, you clod! *(He tries to put a finger to her lips, but she moves away from him)* A witch! A witch! Which I am not.

JESTER

It's just that when Father did wonder aloud to me that...//

WIFE

Well, his wondering days are over. Me, a witch? Father was always making too much of me when he wasn't making too little of me.

JESTER

*(Bashful)* Too true, dearie. "She's not a witch!" I'd say every time Father would start that silliness.

WIFE

Yes, the best way to have someone stop suspecting me of practicing magic is to constantly jabber how I am *not* a witch. *(Imitating him)* She's just a shrew. *(Swatting him)* That worked.

JESTER

Told Father to cut all this clack about the dark arts. Told him, "Whether you think she's a witch or not, the woman's my wife."

WIFE

No, someone likely prattled to Father about me helping a poor knight's wife knocked up seven times in six years. Hostage to her husband's cock. What made me a witch to Father was telling a poor girl to help herself by sticking a bit of wool soaked in cedar oil up her hoo hoo before the lout jumped her bones.

JESTER

Umm... his blathering about you and the evil one was more from you giving a girl a pot of fennel tea or a potion with pennyroyal the morning *after* her man did the deed. He knew about that.

WIFE

Well, such poor girls can't all run away to a cave. *(Beat)* Witches, slaves, saints, or dead: that's the choices. And if I was a witch, you'd know it because when bathing in that river I saw you gaping at my boobs, I would have turned you into a frog.

JESTER

It's just that Father said that witches will disguise themselves...//

WIFE

*(Yelling)* I'm not a witch. Or a sorceress or soothsayer or anything magical. I don't scutter about telling fortunes by reading little wiggles in a palm. Or singing a witching song to summon spirits.

JESTER

Knowing all the things witches do is maybe not the best denial.

WIFE

If I was a witch, I would have saved Dymphna.

JESTER

I have the same wish that we could have saved Dymphna.

WIFE

You wish that? You're the one wished us here! Escape Damon's moldy fort... for a moldy cave! And all because you couldn't polish your Jester's mirror shiny enough to show your master his folly.

JESTER

You know I tried. It's easy for non-Jesters to go on about how we Jesters should be (*Mirror gesture*) a mirror to our Kings. In front of everyone, I said other kings would laugh at him. Sleep with your daughter? Then what would be next? His dog, the sheep? But *that* didn't work because apparently as a youth *with* the other kings, he had bribed a shepherd one night and they all...//

WIFE

Pagans! Hicks and hillbillies.

JESTER

Exactly. Pagans. Wicca white trash. And nobody more pagan than King Damon when you get down to it. And when a pagan King wants what he wants, believes that a young woman will make him young again, then no words I said...//

WIFE

It's not just the pagans. Or Kings who want what they want that make a woman suffer. Or die. It's all men. Even the priests.

JESTER

You'll get no argument from me on that one. (*Sitting*) Father G. was useless in protecting poor Dymphna.

WIFE

Useless. God rest his soul. Better to spend his time figuring out how to find a husband for Dymphna.



JESTER

A husband? Dymphna insisted on virginity. Forever and ever.

WIFE

*(Dismissively)* Plenty wealthy old fellows out there just looking for a bit of companionship. Not eager to lie with a woman, just appreciate having someone to run the feasts, beat the servants, brighten up the processions. She'd stay a virgin with someone like that. And then she might have saved herself. And us.

JESTER

*(Edging outside)* But we might be saved, my joy. If they've gone. And you asked what's next. I have the answer. *(Performative)* Pilgrimage. We will walk the world and again lead a pilgrimage.

WIFE

A pilgrimage? Your head is as soft as the cheese from this godforsaken village. Have you scrubbed away all memory of our last pilgrimage? The nun you diddled on the way to Rome?

JESTER

I don't think she was a real nun. And it was just a bit of kissing really. To comfort her who was sick and seeking succor as a pilgrim. *(Beat)* Her habit stayed on the whole time.

WIFE

But did your pants stay on? Don't answer. Pilgrimages are out.

JESTER

You asked what we will do. And then give out with chuntering and grumbling when I...//

WIFE

I know what we will do. We will leave this cave. What did you say? One step at a time. *(Pushing him toward entrance)* Go somewhere else and hope it's warm and not cold, that there is food, not just dirt. That starts by us skulking outside to see that those ugly rough killers are gone. *(Keeps pushing closer to the entrance)* Then get some food and more water and wood for the fire...

*(Wailing of 'God' and 'Demons' louder than ever. JESTER falls onto the floor bringing down WIFE as well where they sidle back to the cauldron.) (The STRANGER, appearance now disheveled, spins into the room. He whirls around moaning seemingly unaware of the presence of others.)*

JESTER

This is it. Our executioner. Doing the Dance of Death apparently. I guess you fancy me going first, my joy? *(She cuffs him)*

WIFE

Sssh! He sees us not.

*(STRANGER dances faster and then collapses)*

STRANGER

*(Shrieking) God! God! God! (Rises again and dances slowly in ever widening circles) God! Demons! God! Demons! God! Demons!*

JESTER

If he is here to kill us, couldn't he do it more quickly?

WIFE

He hasn't even drawn his sword. He lacks the green garb of King Damon's men. Perhaps they've gone?

*(STRANGER noticing them for the first time shrieks loudly while dancing in even more animated fashion with high steps and kicks)*

STRANGER

*(Progressively softer) God! Demons! God! Demons!*

JESTER

He's quite good at the kicks. The singing needs work.

WIFE

He's afflicted, husband! Another of those mad men that keep bustling into these caves.

(STRANGER *dances toward them.*)

WIFE

The man is sick. He needs help. Remember one of the pilgrims in Rome said mad dancing could come from bad bread, the wild twisting and screeching.

JESTER

I've had some pretty rotten bread in my day and it never made me twirl like that.

STRANGER

(*Progressively louder*) God! Demons! God! Demons!

WIFE

(*She moves cautiously toward STRANGER who keeps his distance by rising and dancing away*) Welcome, Stranger. You are safe in this cave.

JESTER

Welcome? More here's your cap what's your hurry! If the King and his murderers linger or return, they will hear his yammering.

WIFE

The man is sick. We have to help.

(STRANGER *stops suddenly, looks them both in the eye, then shrieks and twirls faster than ever*)

JESTER

Those with madness are suffering for their sins.

WIFE

If madness came from sins, then every person we know would be frothing at the mouth.

(STRANGER *stop-starts his slow circles*)

STRANGER

(*In each of their faces as he dances*) God! Demons! God! Demons!

JESTER

(*To WIFE*) This bellowing gelt will give us away.

WIFE

You pray to God to save us, you muddlepate, but do naught for him?  
Remember the Gospel where Jesus saves the madman?

JESTER

You've always been much better at Gospels than I, dearest. Go ahead  
and save him. (*Wife closes on STRANGER who dances faster as the  
JESTER mimics him*)

WIFE

(*Moves closer to STRANGER*) I want to help you. (*His dancing slows  
to a sway as JESTER continues more animatedly*)

STRANGER

(*Timidly*) God. Demons?

JESTER

Shouldn't you look at his tongue? (*To STRANGER*) Show your  
tongue to my wife. (*Sticks out his tongue and STRANGER laughs  
wildly. JESTER enjoying response mugs and winks*) Show your  
tongue. Is it as long as mine? As red? As pretty? As clever? As  
skilled? (*Places ass-cap on STRANGER's head*)

WIFE

You're not helping me with this.