

THOROUGHLY PUCKED

Phil Parker

‘Will Shakespeare is a cheap plagiarist, an unprincipled charlatan!’

The world wobbled about me as I stood on the table, declaring my judgement to the denizens of the Cheapside tavern. The same bastards who cheered as gravity chose that moment to hurl me onto the floor, amidst the shit and the straw and the vomit. Admittedly some of the vomit was mine, I can’t comment about the shit.

The next thing I remembered was having my head dunked in water so cold my face scraped against thick ice as I was hauled out of it. I don’t recommend it as a way to recover from a drunken binge; I’ve known two men die from the experience, their friends forgot to lift their heads out of the water in time. But in those seconds, as you gasp for air like witch’s breath, you vouchsafe you will never imbibe a single jack of ale ever again. And you hold to that promise, sometimes for hours afterwards.

So it was I encountered the world from a soberer perspective while stinking water froze on my face, hair and clothes. I leaned against the horse trough and presented my friends with the most disgruntled expression a man can muster when its frozen into a rictus of shock. My friends found my situation amusing for some reason.

‘Thou whoreson! Pickled herrings may have less alcohol in their fibre than thee!’

‘Will Kempe!’ I snapped back, ‘thou has the face of a bull’s arse and that which spills from it only confirms the similarity.’

It made Tommy Nashe laugh but then everything I said had that effect. He held out a hand and pulled me to my feet. Master Kempe’s expression was as frosty as the night air and I went to slap him hard on the shoulder as a gesture of friendliness. I missed and collided with the horse trough.

I woke to something scuttling over my face. The lack of comfort and the foul stench told me I’d slept on the floor of Tommy Nashe’s room. Again. No one snored like him, no one farted like him either.

Another day dawned.

I climbed out the window and scabbled across the pantiles of adjoining houses, eluding Tommy's landlord who'd not taken kindly to my sexual adventures with his teenage son. Breakfast would soothe my rebellious belly and I knew precisely where to find it whilst conducting some mischief at the same time.

A short while later I sauntered into the impressive kitchen of the Lord Chamberlain, Sir George Carey, in Blackfriars. Being a frequent visitor drew me no attention, and the cause of that frequency leapt up from his chair with a grin on his well-maintained face.



'Robin Goodfellow, as I live and breathe sirrah!'

I was hugged and squeezed a little too intimately but my host never wasted an opportunity for a grope. For anyone other than the Lord Chamberlain's personal valet it screamed degenerate behaviour but wealth and power, and people's proximity to it, can change such perceptions.

The inaccurately-named Valentine Flower seemed bewitched by my good looks and tall, athletic physique. I only had to flash my adorable blue eyes at him and Mister Flower wilted with the heat.

'Valentine.'

I adopted the light, slightly effeminate, tone that matched his own. He didn't appear to notice my mockery. Likewise, in my overly flamboyant bow once he'd released me. Sure enough food a small beer appeared at the click of his fingers. I wolfed it down as he sat a little too close, hand on my knee, grinning. He'd likely seen forty summers or more yet he appeared miraculously well-preserved. Such are the benefits of luxury and money.

'I hear,' he said as he leaned in conspiratorially, 'thou hast made certain accusations about a certain actor and playwright. Is't true?'

I nodded. My mouth was too full to speak. This breakfast was going to need to last me a few days.

He grinned, his eyes flashed with mischief.

‘My master is displeased. E’en now he seeks to proclaim certain penalties against thy person, should thy words be proven. Tread carefully, my fine cockerel.’

My knee got a little squeeze and his hand travelled up my thigh tentatively. I let it. I was hungry.

‘But, my lord, I speak’st the truth. That preening peacock hast repeated things he swore to take to his grave.’ Anger rose up, stirring the residual alcohol in my stomach to make it burn. ‘Your master must understand the offence his pet has caused.’

The wandering hand on my thigh froze.

‘Fie! The Lord Chamberlain is not instructed by wastrels and scoundrels.’

I apologised. I needed this aging coxcomb on my side. Politics is all about swallowing your pride so you can spit fire later. A few well-chosen compliments and access to the convenient hole in my hose and I was back in favour again. The old fool leaned closer.

‘What is this secret of which you speak?’ His oily tone fell to a whisper. ‘Dost thou seek discretion from the Bard regarding your identity as a sprite? For he has named you no better than a hobgoblin in mine own presence.’

I nodded dejectedly as part of the pantomime I began to write, it immediately brought sympathy.

‘Marry, but my life is in danger, Val. My faerie kin will seek me out and kill me for the secret shared with Master Shakespeare. Perhaps all who support and encourage him too.’

That stirred panic. My people were known to be cruel and vindictive. Prone to fits of temper that caused havoc and ruined lives. They were feared even more than Catholic assassins. My lascivious patch knew how to react to such threats.

He threw me out.

I’d overplayed my hand, terrified the one ally I possessed. Remonstrating outside the home of the most powerful man in England wasn’t viewed favourably. Within minutes of me hammering on the door, begging for Valentine to let me back in so I could reassure him he wasn’t in danger, the local constables accosted me. These were men not known for their patience and diplomacy. I left two unconscious and another crouching on the street holding his groin and crying.

I'd acquired two things. A split lip and an even greater desire to ruin William Shakespeare for the trouble he'd caused me.

I marched angrily back to Cheapside, intent on drowning my sorrows for the rest of the day. In front of me, London Bridge spanned the stinking river, brown with the effluent of the city. It matched both my mood and my future. My people had spies everywhere, they'd have heard of the new play and the role their king played in it. They'd hear how it featured the dispute between the rival Courts, conflict the Fae did their utmost to keep hidden from humanity. And, as if that wasn't bad enough, they'd have heard of its cause.

And if that Warwickshire bastard had left it there, I might not have worried.

Instead he'd signed my death warrant by including me in his play. Not just some walk-on part either. No. "If we shadows have offended..." That's what he had my character say.

I was more than offended. I was bloody psychotic.



The next thing I knew I was marching over London Bridge, the heads of the latest victims to displease the queen jammed on spikes as warnings to others to stay out of trouble. If my king caught me, it would be more than my head stuck on a spike, and I would still be alive to endure the pain.



My destination lay before me, on the south bank, in the Liberties. Its white-washed walls and thatched roof rose up into the grey sky.

That was when I got the idea.

Theatres are famously flammable.

Will the Spill couldn't perform his Midsummer Nightmare if the venue was a pile of smoking ashes. With luck his bones might be among them. Sweet, fiery revenge carried me forwards, elbowing aside the heavy traffic in the narrow thoroughfare. When someone walked into me, my hand snatched the knife I kept hidden in a boot, ready for a fight.

'Stay your hand Robin!'

Will Kempe stood ready to defend himself, he knew me of old. He looked around nervously, lowered his voice and placed a friendly arm around my shoulder.

‘Beware my friend. Danger lurks nearby.’

He manoeuvred me to the side of the bridge, smiling and nodding as though he dealt with a simple-minded jolt-head. The ceaseless traffic of tradesmen, bawds, beggars and assorted ne’er-do-wells paid us little attention but now I searched the crowd for enemies. We paused by a wooden fence, below us the swirling, stinking flow of sewage that was the River Thames flowed to the sea. The smell burned the nose and made the eyes water but Will maintained not attracting attention was a higher priority than the assault on my senses.

‘Methinks a member of thine race seeks thee. He was a malevolent fellow, enchafed and full of ill-devined villainies.’

Half the men who came looking for me possessed those qualities, I asked why this latest threat should come from my own people.



Will Kempe, never one to hide his feelings, glared at me and called me so many names he confirmed his position as the swiftest wit in the Lord Chamberlain’s company. A reputation Master Shake-your-dick resented. With his repertoire of insults exhausted temporarily, he said,

‘His garb. Black as the night. Made of the finest cotton like all your folk. He made no secret of his ancestry.’

The description didn’t help. The Fae wore black in this realm to denote their grief at having the world they loved usurped by human beings. I’m sure Will read my expression.

‘One thing more. His visage.’ My friend took his fore finger and drew a line from the left eyebrow, down the cheek, to merge with the top lip. ‘A scar, like so.’

My reaction told Will all he needed to know. He looked around nervously. It was a futile gesture, if an attack was imminent a human being wouldn’t know about it until it was too late.

‘You know this ill-bred miscreant?’

Oh yes. I knew him all right. I nodded. ‘I gave him that scar.’



In Brittany and Cornwall, they called him the King of the Dead. They worshipped him on All Hallow's Eve, an act of fearful respect rather than adoration. His capacity to kill without hesitation and regret, his complete lack of morality, made him the perfect assassin. That and his mastery of any weapon. I explained all this to the increasingly wide-eyed Kempe who shook his head in disbelief as though such a reputation was impossible to achieve.

'Together we wore the same mantle of warfare but as I tired of the bloodshed, for Ankou, it was as though his hunger could never be satisfied.'

'You fought by his side?'

'Aye, trained as foot soldiers too. He was once a friend.'

I stared into the diarrhoea-brown depths of the Thames. It was so long ago. One drawback of being part of a race which counted its age in centuries, it meant grudges were the same. My king had sent someone who would savour killing me.

From the other side of the bridge someone bellowed my name above the hubbub. Half a dozen members of the Southwark constabulary pointed at me and started running. I did the same. In the opposite direction. Will Kempe joined me. He knew well enough if he was caught there would be few questions asked, more likely a beating. One not everyone survived.

'Wherefore do they seek us Robin?' he called as we barged past bewildered faces, eager to get out of our way and generally display no connection with such criminals.

'Perchance I broke the pates of a brace of their kinsmen earlier.'

Will rolled his eyes.

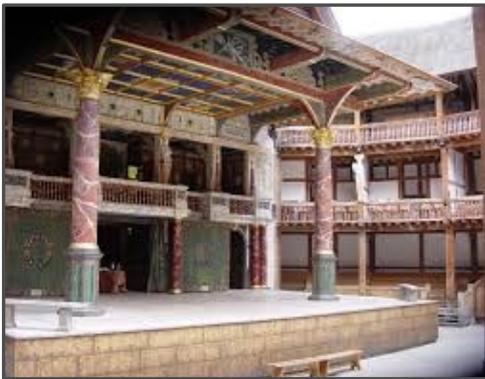
'Well, they vexed me!'

Our flight drew attention from the pleasure-seekers returning to the city wearing the smiles of those who'd won bets at bear-baiting the previous night or whose satisfaction came from a good time in the brothels. My fleeing colleague pointed at the circular wall of The Globe, empty of patrons now. Early morning meant it would also be too early for the

Lord Chamberlain's company to be readying their performance for the day ahead. Behind us, heaving and gasping, like knackered mares, the constabulary followed.

I found myself wondering if I had enough time to set a match to the place and avoid the wrath of the local police force at the same time. They'd be too busy trying to put out the fire, to chase me any further.

Will grabbed my arm and dragged me towards the wattle and daub wall and a door set into it. He opened it with confident familiarity, shoved me into the darkness beyond and shut the door. From nearby he found a sturdy metal weight and smashed it against the door sneck, bending it in such a way as to stop the door from opening.



We were in the Tiring Room I realised, where actors changed costumes and collected their props. On the other side of heavy curtains was the stage. By crossing it I could escape through a similar door on the opposite side.

'Will?'

I turned to the man who'd saved my life. I clasped his forearm, grinned fiercely at him. He was invariably bad-tempered, violent at times, but had the best sense of humour of all my friends. I loved this man like a brother. I needed to tell him what I planned to do. He hated Shakespeare equally as much as me. His wit, his ability to instantly adopt any character you described and the fact the audiences loved him, posed a threat to the pumped-up arse that owned this theatre. He'd understand. He'd probably want to help.

So it was, as I launched into my partly thought-out plan, Will's eyes drifted from mine to stare over my shoulder and widen. You know an expression like that means trouble without needing to turn around. I launched a backward kick, my boot landing against something soft. I used the momentum to spin round, thrusting with my knife without waiting to see what was there. The seconds it takes to make such assessments are ones that cost your life, in my experience.

He expected the attack. My kick might have briefly caught him off guard but Ankou didn't permit me any further largesse. If I'd hurt him, he gave no sign as he launched at me

with his sword. I dodged nimbly, using the heavy stage curtain as a shield, a thin and flimsy defence he could penetrate with the point of his weapon.

He'd aged badly. The penalty of low-born ancestry. Sallow skin clung to his skull and the once-toned body was skeletal in appearance. He looked like the death figure his Breton fans paraded around towns in their carts.

Good looks had vanished but not his speed and agility.

As his blade sliced through the stage curtain, I grabbed the thick fabric and twisted it, snagging his blade at the same time. Hanging on to the material I swung at him, boots landing in his belly with sufficient force to knock him backwards onto his bony arse. I briefly considered landing on him with my knife but I didn't doubt he'd have a similar weapon secreted somewhere, he'd expect such an attack.

I looked around for my friend. Will was already at the opposite side of the theatre, opening the door. A loud thump against the entrance we'd just used told me the local constabulary were not far behind. I was reminded of a line spoken by Sir John Falstaff in Shakespeare's play about Henry the Fourth; 'the better part of valour, is discretion.'

Good advice.

I ran.

Ankou's curses questioned my ancestry which was ironic, given his rapid physical deterioration. I slammed the door and made off for London Bridge, Will Kempe like a hare in front of me. Glancing over my shoulder only served to frustrate me beyond belief. My pursuer burst through the door as though it was like the scenery in the building we'd just left. One still intact, not a smoking ruin which would stop the performance of the play that could cost me my life.

This was William Shakespeare's fault and I hated him with every fibre of my soul.

Anger, in most men, provokes rage and fire in their belly. It does a lot more than that in me. My problem lies in an inability to rein in that rage, it spirals out of control as all the injustices visited upon me, over too-long a life, come a-haunting.

Valour and discretion swapped places as I snatched a sword from a young gentleman so freshly satisfied from a nearby brothel he still wore a smug smile. He took one look at my fury, held up his hands in surrender and made off the instant I turned to await my enemy.

Who wasted no time in joining me with a clash of blades.

London is no stranger to such fights. A loose circle of onlookers gathered swiftly, laying bets on the outcome. No doubt their assessment of my opponent's apparent age gave me the advantage as I became the favourite to win. At least initially. Gambling picked up within a minute of Ankou's swordsmanship becoming apparent.

Skill with a sword comes from practice. Action, or more appropriately reaction, needs to be instinctive and that comes from muscle memory, when your body behaves in a way it remembers from similar experiences. Every thrust, jab and swipe arrived in the space where my opponent's body had been a split second before. It was like he could read my mind. In a way, he could. We'd trained and fought together, except he'd kept fighting.



My interests had diversified.

It took him no more than three or four minutes to get the measure of me. By that point I was fighting for my life, vaguely aware of the gambling going against me as the bystanders cheered on my enemy. His cadaverous face formed a grin that stretched his skin like leather parchment, wrinkling and furrowing around the corners of his mouth. I knew I had to focus on the fight but I couldn't shake off that grin, he knew he had me beaten, he was a cat playing with a rat.

Somewhere inside me, in a place so deep I thought I'd never see him again, I felt Puck rise up. The name given to the man I became when the last threads of control snapped. That's the danger of playing with a rat, they have a habit of attacking regardless of their safety.

The world turned red. Energy surged through my veins as I roared something unintelligible and my blade blurred in the morning sunlight. Ankou's eyes narrowed, the grin vanished, he recognised the arrival of the creature which had lain dormant in me for so long. He knew the danger of waking it.

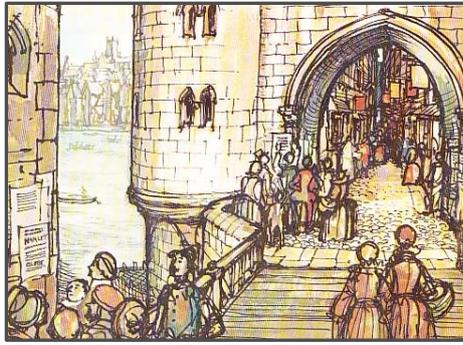
He staggered backwards, parrying the blistering speed of my blade, his forehead rupturing into deep furrows as he concentrated on defending himself against my attack. My sword arm operated independently of my brain, the muscles within it knew what to do. It left the synapses in my brain free to focus on the need to kill. To slaughter.

To eviscerate.

Nothing else existed. All I could see was his expression. The panic. The acknowledgement of imminent death. The realisation he could do nothing to stop it.

I grinned. Teeth clenched, lips curled in snarling, blind hatred.

We were on London bridge suddenly. I was vaguely aware of the thronging crowds



dodging our blades but only as a minor irritation. I'd kill any of them if they got in my way and somehow they appeared to sense that.

His chest heaved now, a sheen of sweat shone on his sallow skin as he continued to step backwards, up against the wooden fence of the bridge. With nowhere left to go he looked into my eyes and I saw fear there. I grinned at him as my sword arm thrust forward, to impale his belly.

Except he wasn't there.

It took a second to make sense of the cracking sound. The noise of the wooden fence breaking. I stepped forward, looked down into the churning brown shit of the river as my victim rose to the surface briefly. He floundered, arms raised for help that wasn't there as the current caught him, dragged his head below the surface. A few seconds later, it appeared further downstream, bobbing amidst turbulent waves only to disappear again, for good.

I watched the river churn along on its way to discharge its effluent into the sea. Slowly, imperceptibly, I felt Puck leave me. I could tell by the exhaustion that took his place. My sword arm felt like it held a heavy weight, my legs felt like jelly and I wobbled. I felt strong hands grab my shoulders to stop me from following Ankou. I fell on my arse heavily and looked up into the anxious face of Will Kempe.

He didn't say anything. The fear on his face was etched deep.

'Thank you,' I said, though it didn't sound like my voice.

He nodded and relaxed slightly.

With the fight ended and without a definitive outcome many of the onlookers fell into arguments over the bets and I was soon ignored. The distant cry of the constables caused Will to haul me to my feet and drag me through the jostling masses. For a brief moment I caught sight of a man in expensive clothes and distinctive balding head strolling towards the Liberties but the crowd swallowed him just as quickly.

I was so exhausted I couldn't have taken my revenge on him. A falling feather would have knocked me over. Besides, I'd killed someone and the inevitable angst filled my head, as it always did when Puck appeared. It was one of the reasons for hating the creature, it wrought havoc and left me to deal with the aftermath.

'Robin.' Will Kempt plonked me on a bench outside an inn and called for ale. 'Mark me. Thou should'st depart this town. Marry, methinks thy life be imperilled. There be those who will seek mischief now.'

I nodded. I'd reached the same conclusion, despite my addled brain.

I reached out and took the man's hand, held it tightly, my speed surprised him and made him squeak in a most unmanly fashion.

'Will, thou art a goodly friend. No man could ask for better.'

It got the faintest of smiles.

'Whither shall ye go?'

I shrugged. My people could be relentless with their vengeance. I needed to travel a good distance if I was to lose them. Find a life where I could hide in obscurity.

'Florence, Milan perchance. What is it thy master has my namesake say in his foul work? "I am that merry wanderer of the night."'

For once, Will Kempe laughed. He clasped me on the shoulder fondly.

'Aye, those be the words. And if I might twist his epilogue, as I'm wont to do now and then, let me wish you this...'



He adopted his famous pose, spoke in a voice loud and clear so those around us stopped, listened and admired. His eyes sparkled with a mixture of merriment and sadness as he declared,

*'As the shadows you have offended
Take my advice, so all is mended,
'Cos you've brought excitement here
Means now it's time to disappear.'*