

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



# Men of Honour

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by John Upton

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EXTRACT

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## CHARACTERS

|                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| WILL SHAKESPEARE    | writer, aged 23, 30 and 37                       |
| EARL OF SOUTHAMPTON | nobleman, Will's patron, aged 21 and 28          |
| ANTHONY MUNDAY      | writer, republican, Puritan, spy, aged 34 and 41 |
| ANNE SHAKESPEARE    | Will's wife, aged 31, 38 and 45                  |
| EMILIA LANIER       | Dark, poet, aged 24 and 31                       |
| JOHN SHAKESPEARE    | Will's father, aged 60s                          |

The set is non-naturalistic, with the playing areas including a garden, Will's lodgings, a pub, the apartments of the Earl of Southampton, and his estate. The play takes place in London and Stratford-Upon-Avon in the years 1587, 1594 and 1601.

NOTE: Some fencing with rapiers is required.

The major events of Shakespeare's life depicted here did occur. The identity of the Dark Lady is still contentious, but there is a strong case for Emilia Lanier. Dates have sometimes been compressed for dramatic effect.

## ACT ONE

### Prologue

(ON A SCREEN, THE PICTURE OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE FROM THE FIRST FOLIO).

(SOUTHAMPTON AND MUNDAY ON OPPOSITE SIDES OF THE STAGE, PERHAPS SPOTLIT, LOOKING AT THE PICTURE.

SOUTHAMPTON IS RICHLY DRESSED. HE'S AGED 20. MUNDAY, A PURITAN, IS AGED 34).

SOUTHAMPTON (TO AUDIENCE) Will Shakespeare was my friend. We loved each other. It ended badly.

MUNDAY (TO AUDIENCE) William Shakespeare was evil. Reactionary. He loved kings. Noblemen. The very idea of a republic offended him. But we weren't all like that. Some of us craved freedom.

SOUTHAMPTON If you'll allow me. I'm the Right Honorable Henry Wroisthesley (RISLEY), third Earl of Southampton and Baron of Titchfield. My father, the second Earl, a Catholic, was imprisoned in the Tower and forced out of national life because of his religion.

MUNDAY I'm Anthony Munday, my father wasn't an Earl. I'm a patriot and an advocate of England's blessed revolution against Popery and murderous Jesuit conspiracy. And I'm as good as playwright as William Shakespeare.

SOUTHAMPTON In his own humble opinion. Will Shakespeare wasn't evil, he was a country boy with a swift eye for nature and a sweet way with words, who found himself deep in issues he couldn't understand.

MUNDAY Shakespeare was a coward who fought change. He was a lapdog of the rich. And there's nothing the rich can do to change the fact.  
(HE EXITS).

SOUTHAMPTON Puritans. Religion is a blessing and a curse. This is a market town, Stratford-Upon-Avon, in the year of Our Lord Fifteen-Eightyseven. Times

are difficult, trade has been depressed, there's starvation and terrible debt.  
John Shakespeare used to be Mayor here, High Bailiff.

Scene One

(STRATFORD. JOHN SHAKESPEARE'S HOUSE - GARDEN).

(ANNE ENTERS, FURIOUS. SHE'S 31 AND DRESSED FOR THE MARKET. SHE LOOKS AROUND. NO-ONE. SHE PROWLs. A FEW MORE MOMENTS AND JOHN ENTERS. HE'S ABOUT 60).

ANNE           It's not fair!

JOHN           It's not.

ANNE           In front of the whole market!

JOHN           For a man of God, he's a devil.

ANNE           But I warned you.

JOHN           It's not my fault.

ANNE           I go to his church. I pray. Yet he points me out. Shouting "Spawn of Satan"! He calls me "Spawn of Satan" in front of everyone I know!

JOHN           He's a Puritan fanatic.

ANNE           I couldn't help myself. Called him "Spawn of London". Somebody laughed. He followed me down the street shouting hellfire. Satan's bitch, he called me. I can't tell Will.

JOHN           It's his job.

ANNE           The vicar's job is saving souls not cursing his parish.

JOHN           Sir Thomas Lucy brought him here to intimidate us Catholics. I'm still an alderman, they need to damn me, it's not you they want.

ANNE           But it's me they got. Please. Can't you just go?

JOHN           No, I can't.

ANNE           If you go to church, what can they say?

JOHN           I can't go! I was High Bailiff, I'm an alderman! Old Tom Lucy puts ruffians at the door. They spit, they push, they shout that I won't pay my

ANNE How long is this for?

JOHN How can I tell? It's politics.

ANNE It's poison. All I want is to buy food for my babies without catching it from Vicar and his arselickers.

(WILL ENTERS, AGED MID-TWENTIES. HE'S SCANTILY DRESSED, COVERED IN BLOOD AND CARRIES A BLOODSTAINED KNIFE. ANNE AND JOHN DON'T SEE HIM AT FIRST).

JOHN Will could help.

ANNE Will does help.

JOHN Will makes things worse.

WILL How does he do that?

(JOHN APPROACHES WILL ANGRILY).

JOHN You could help me selling wool.

WILL Your wool's illegal. You don't have a permit.

JOHN Only because the guild won't give me one. It's a dirty monopoly. They've shut me out. So I do it anyway.

WILL Last time I helped you there were soldiers in hedgerows with swords and guns.

JOHN I knew something was amiss. I had horses. We got clear.

WILL You lost your wool. Cost you fifty pound. Borrowed money. We almost starved, but for the kindness of folk as poor as us.

JOHN Last time was a mistake. The price was too good. I was greedy. It won't happen again.

WILL It's their means to trap us. We can't do it.

ANNE With you and Will in prison, how will we live? It's the children.

JOHN Without money, how will we live? Trade's dried up, I've got creditors with hungry young 'uns hammering my door. I was High Bailiff! You think I

(HE EXITS, ANGRY AND DEEPLY FRUSTRATED).

WILL Stubborn, stupid old man.

(BUT ANNE IS FEELING GUILTY).

ANNE I was cruel to him.

WILL Cruel? How?

ANNE You know about the council?

WILL No.

ANNE They've forced him out.

WILL (SHOCKED) Expelled him?

ANNE Last night. I heard at market.

WILL Does he know?

ANNE He knows. Look at him. But spoke as if he don't.

WILL Twenty years an alderman. This can't go on... I'll speak to him. Make it up.

(ANNE DECANTS WATER FROM A BUCKET INTO A BOWL FOR WILL TO WASH).

ANNE How was slaughtering?

WILL Some men love it.

ANNE It's money.

WILL It's more. Their eyes shine like knives. They caper in blood.

ANNE It's not they under the knife.

(HE REACHES PAST HER TO SCOOP WATER IN HIS HANDS, RUBS IT ONTO HIS FACE).

WILL And the cattle know. Smell it in the time of year. Though you hide hammer and knife, they struggle, shit, scream. It's a fearsome scream with death in it. (HE JOINS HER). Mother me.

ANNE I will. And better. Shortly I'll wife you. On your back.

WILL I'll bite and snaffle like a stallion.

WILL As quietly as an altar boy with hands joined in holy prayer ... or in some lower gasping reverence.

ANNE Hush it, you... I bought five duck eggs. One each for us and the babies. (HE WASHES OFF MORE BLOOD IN THE BOWL).

WILL Couldn't afford more?

ANNE There's plenty hungrier than us.

WILL Ten years of bailiffs, creditors, courts. He blames old Tom Lucy, but Tom Lucy didn't get him into debt. Anne, I've been offered work. Well paid work. Or it can be.

ANNE What work?

WILL The visiting players. The Queen's Men. One of their actors got in a tavern fight, was stabbed in the throat. They needed someone. A small part. I offered. They liked it. I can go on their tour and then to London.

ANNE London?

WILL In London, actors are rich. A hundred pounds a year.

ANNE London's another country.

WILL It's not. Four days to walk, two by horse. That's not far. I'll pay his debts. Buy you a house. There's the other boys to help him.

ANNE But you're the eldest. You were given.

WILL That's my mother.

ANNE It's true.

WILL It's their fancy.

ANNE It's not only your mother. Agnes says it also.

WILL Your friend Agnes divined it from a toad by moonlight.

ANNE Agnes has got the gift.

WILL Agnes is a witch.

ANNE Don't say it, Will - that causes trouble. You were given. Two babes dead before you and plague raging, and him praying, and God sparing you? You

WILL This is offered now. I have to.

ANNE He's shamed. He's so wretched. Wait a bit.

WILL He's had ten years. He can't fix it. I have to do this.

(LIGHTS CHANGE).

Scene Two

(SOUTHAMPTON'S LONDON APARTMENTS. 1594).

SOUTHAMPTON (TO AUDIENCE) Seven years later. London's a brutal place.

Squalid. Yet exciting - refined. I'm what's refined. At Cambridge I excelled at literature. I have exquisite taste. Poets flock to me. Will did. He'd had some success writing with Marlowe, then he came to my attention with his first play on his own, a bloodthirsty piece of Tudor propaganda called Richard The Third. Much brio, great success. Then plague closed the theatres for two years. No work for actors. Will would have starved if I hadn't known quality.

(MUSIC IS HEARD. APPLAUSE. A TENTATIVE, OBSEQUIOUS WILL JOINS SOUTHAMPTON. THE EARL IS NINE YEARS WILL'S JUNIOR. SOUTHAMPTON HAS BEEN HOLDING FORTH).

SOUTHAMPTON What's the rent on a cottage for a month, Will? No, a year.

WILL For a year? Two shillings, my lord.

SOUTHAMPTON My guardian, mighty Lord Burghley, has fined me five thousand pounds.

WILL Five thousand pounds?

SOUTHAMPTON Five thousand pounds. Because after four years of pressure, I still refuse to marry his granddaughter. Face like a mare, brains of a mare, withers of a mare, but I won't throw a leg over her. No, thank you. They thought they could wear me down, Lord Burghley and my mother. But I'll ride the mare I choose, and marry her when I choose, where I choose, if I choose.

SOUTHAMPTON My mother begs me, "Take the Lady Elizabeth". But if truth be known, Will, I've already taken a wife. I've taken a dozen, none of them my own. (THEY LAUGH. SOUTHAMPTON BECOMES SERIOUS). There's corruption in this country. I've watched it. When my father died, mighty Lord Burghley became my guardian. I've seen how power works. And when I'm twentyone this year, I shall challenge it. Thus Burghley wants to tie me to his granddaughter. Money and power, Will, power and money. The coat. Take it off. Let me see... Turn round... Much better. I can't have a ruffian in my retinue. Was there any money left? Have you eaten today? (WILL LOOKS AWKWARD). Here. (HE HANDS OVER MONEY. WILL BOWS LOW).

WILL Your lordship's kindness far outshines my deserving - .

SOUTHAMPTON Yes, yes, I know.

WILL - and my affection and gratitude are unbounded even as the spheres of heaven are unbounded.

SOUTHAMPTON You are servile and obnoxious. You'll prosper very nicely.

WILL Your lordship is very kind.

SOUTHAMPTON Barnabe Barnes has a new collection he's dedicating to me. Lovely work. Have you read it?

WILL Some. Yes, some of it is lovely work.

SOUTHAMPTON Don't pout, you're still my favourite. Your birth means nothing to me, Will. When will your Rape Of Lucrece be published?

WILL In six to eight weeks.

SOUTHAMPTON It will do great things for your reputation.

WILL Your lordship will do greater things for England.

SOUTHAMPTON I'll try. Now stop fawning, you have too much aptitude for it.

WILL Your lordship is my book and my tutor.

SOUTHAMPTON And know your place, you're a Warwickshire wordsmith, not entitled

Shakespeare may abandon verse for the stage. Mmh? I hear he eyes  
money as a tiger eyes meat.

WILL My lord, I am penniless.

SOUTHAMPTON Are you fishing?

WILL No, my lord. Telling the truth.

(EMILIA APPROACHES. SHE'S 24 AND HAS A COOL, DETACHED,  
MYSTERIOUS QUALITY. THOUGH WITH SOUTHAMPTON NOW,  
SHE'S PROPER AND DEMURE).

EMILIA Sir...

SOUTHAMPTON Mistress?

EMILIA Your mother bids me tell you she craves your indulgence.

SOUTHAMPTON How interesting. She's scarcely tolerated my indulgence for years, yet  
now she craves it. What else did she say?

EMILIA That I must fetch you.

SOUTHAMPTON Indeed you are very fetching. Therefore I'll be fetched. Will, I must  
indulge my mother.

(HE EXITS. EMILIA STAYS).

EMILIA You should feel flattered.

WILL Mistress?

EMILIA In order to meet you I smuggled myself in here, hung upon Lady  
Southampton, waylaid a servant and lied to an Earl.

WILL Mistress, you are mistaken. I'm not nobility. My name is - .

EMILIA Will Shakespeare. The poet. Author of the beautiful Venus and Adonis  
and the wonderful Richard The Third, and the awful Titus Andronicus,  
which is a whoring of your talent.

WILL That's a fascinating roll call of my work.

EMILIA My name is Emilia Lanier. I write poetry.

WILL And you ... smuggled yourself into this party...?

WILL            You're a poet. So scan my Titus, justify your giddy judgement.

EMILIA        Titus is Marlowe out of control, excess for its own sake. Richard is more restrained and in restraint, more excessive and evil. Monsters like Richard are interesting because they understand what they want and have the courage to take it.

WILL            That's a lively definition of a monster.

EMILIA        The old poets teach us we may search for the highest perfection in art among the lowest perfidies of life.

WILL            They do that.

EMILIA        I want truth in my art.

WILL            Indeed. As I do.

EMILIA        But I wonder - what is the noblest form of love?

WILL            Why, Agape, which sacrifices itself to set free the beloved. (AGAPAY).

EMILIA        Or is it Eros, which feasts on love and finds truth in the deep mysteries of Dionysus?

WILL            (FASCINATED) Perhaps we can discuss these things.

EMILIA        Perhaps we can.

WILL            I think I'd like that.

EMILIA        As to your plays ... Titus isn't the way.

WILL            It isn't?

EMILIA        Think comedies. People want to laugh.

(LIGHTS CHANGE).

### Scene Three

(EMILIA'S DRAWING ROOM. WILL RISES FROM BEHIND A COUCH, FULLY DRESSED. HE'S FASTENING HIS CLOTHES. EMILIA STANDS, ALSO ADJUSTING HER CLOTHES).

EMILIA        We mustn't do that again. Not with my husband in the house.

WILL            I'm sorry. I forgot myself.

(THEY KISS).

WILL Queen with her quiver.

EMILIA (QUICKFIRE BANTER) Cupid with his arrow.

WILL Majesty with her downy crown

EMILIA Sceptre of alabaster.

WILL Chalice of Eros.

EMILIA Mitre of ivory.

WILL Regina vagina.

EMILIA You're far too talented to be shut away in the country.

WILL You're far too dangerous to be let loose in the city. You're sanity yet you're madness. So sanity is madness. Madness sanity... I love you.

EMILIA And I'm married. Be content.

WILL Why aren't women in Stratford like you?

EMILIA They are.

WILL They're not.

EMILIA If they had books and tutors...

WILL You're right... (HIS MOOD DARKENS). Oh, I don't deserve this. None of it.

EMILIA Of course you deserve it.

WILL How can I deserve to be happy? For seven years, I've missed my children's childhood, corrupted my wife's forbearance, conscripted my father's charity when he has none to give. I said I'd send money but I've had none to send. I've failed them utterly.

(SHE CAN SEE THERE'S A DEEP ANXIETY).

EMILIA What is it? Tell me.

WILL Emilia, I'm terrified. I'm failing. I should go home... I've spoken to the Lord Chamberlain's Men, they want my new comedy. I've put an idea to them. Accept me as a shareholder and I'll write plays only for them. And