

*Dark
Amelia*

SALLY O'REILLY

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To Georgia, with love

*Past cure I am, now reason is past care,
And frantic-mad with evermore unrest;
My thoughts and my discourse as madman's are
At random from the truth, vainly expressed;
For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.*

William Shakespeare
Sonnet 147

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

AEMILIA BASSANO, later LANYER, a Lady, Poet and Whore

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, a Poet

ALFONSO LANYER, a Recorder Player, Husband to Aemilia

HENRY CAREY, Lord Hunsdon, a Lord Chamberlain

HENRY LANYER, a Schoolboy, Son to Aemilia

JOAN DAUNT, an Apothecary and Serving Woman

ANTHONY INCHBALD, a Dwarf and Landlord

SIMON FORMAN, a Cunning-man and Lecher

TOM FLOOD, a Player

ANNE FLOOD, a Widow, Mother to Tom

MOLL CUTPURSE, a Cutpurse and Cross-dresser

ELIZABETH TUDOR, a Queen

RICHARD BURBAGE, a Player and Sharer

FATHER DUNSTAN, a Priest

PARSON JOHN, a Parson

LETTICE COOPER, a Lady-in-Waiting to the Queen

CUTHBERT TOTTLE, a Bookseller and Printer

THOMAS DEKKER, a Poet and Pamphlet-writer

MARIE VERRE, a Servant

LILITH, a Demon

ANN SHAKESPEARE, Wife to William Shakespeare

Various courtiers, players, musicians, street vendors, wives, servants, wherry-men, citizens, browsers, cozeners, plague-victims, prentice-boys, witches and wraiths

Prologue

I am a witch for the modern age. I keep my spells small, and price them high. What they ask for is the same as always. The common spells deal in love, or what love is meant to make, or else hate, and what that might accomplish. I mean the getting of lovers or babies (or the getting rid of them) or a handy hex for business or revenge. When a spell works, they keep you secret, and take the credit. When it fails, of course, the fault is yours. So a witch is wise to be cautious, quiet, and hard to find.

That was true even before they started the burnings. Across the sea in Saxony and such places, whole market squares are set alight; the thatch roars up into the night; five score witches burn at once. Most would not even know how to charm a worm out of a hole. Old, and stupid, and too visible, that was their mistake. In England too, blood is let to put a stop to magic. I saw a witch hanged in Thieving Lane. They sliced off her hands and tongue, and split her down from neck to crotch, so all her guts spilled out before her eyes. They were like werewolves, mad for gore. I can still hear the voice she made with her wound-mouth: a call to Evil and a plague on all the lot of them. (This was a true witch, five hundred years old.)

But now I want to tell you my story. About Aemilia, the girl who wanted too much. Not seamed and scragged as I am now, but quick and shimmering and short of patience. About my dear son, whom I love too well. About my two husbands, and my one true love. And Dr Forman, that most lustful of

physicians. The silk dress I wore, the first time I went to ask for his predictions. Yellow and gold, with a fine stiff ruff that crumpled in a breath of rain. How my skin was set dark against it; how the people stared when I rushed by.

Act I

Passion

Scene I

Whitehall, March 1592

'The Queen!'

'The Queen comes! Lights, ho!'

It is night, and a Thames mist has crept over Whitehall, so the great sprawl of the palace is almost hid from sight.

'Bring lights!' come the voices again, and the doors of the great hall are flung open, and a hundred shining lanterns blaze into the foggy night, and serving men rush out, torches aflame, to show the way.

And here she is, great Gloriana, and a light comes off her too, as she progresses towards the wide entrance and its gaggle of waiting gentlemen, and the Master of the Revels puffing on the steps. There never was a mortal such as she. Behind her is the moving tableau of her ladies, silver and white like the nymphs of Nysa. Beyond them, the spluttering torches and the night sky. She is set among the fire-illuminated faces like a great jewel, so that as I look at her I blink to save my sight. Her face is white as bone, her lips the colour of new-spilt blood. Her eyes, dark and darting, take in all before her and give nothing back. And her hair, the copper hue of turning leaves, is dressed high in plaits and curlicues and riddled with pearls.

'Is Mr Burbage with us?' she demands, as she sets her small foot on the bottom step. 'Is he within? We've heard this is a comedy – we want his promise we shall be forced to laugh.'

I look down at the skirts of her farthingale, which is of Genoa velvet, glittering with a multitude of ant-sized gems.

The Master of the Revels makes his lowest bow. 'He is waiting, Your Majesty. He and the playwright are inside.'

'Is it witty?' she demands of him. 'We are in peevish spirits. This cloaked-up night disquiets us.'

'I laughed until I thought I had the palsy,' says the Master of the Revels. 'I trust it will divert Your Majesty.'

'Trust! Hmm. You are amusing us already. What did you say it was called?'

'It is *The Taming of the Shrew*, Your Majesty.'

'Ha!' says the Queen. Which could mean anything. I follow her whispering, simpering retinue and we go inside.

At one end of the long banqueting hall is a grand archway, built after the manner of the theatre at Venice. The archway shows a magnificent Roman street lined with gold and marble columns. Above the street is a plaster firmament. King Henry built the banqueting hall in the years of his great glory, and the ceiling, which swirls with choirs of angels, seems nearly high enough to reach to heaven itself, while the walls are hung with cloth-of-gold and tissue like the hazy outskirts of a dream. The most powerful lords and ladies in England are perched upon the stools and benches which are ranged before the stage, and above them all, upon a raised dais, stands the throne. It glitters as the pages bear their lanterns into the hall, dividing into twin processions of golden light. Even this seat itself has its own air of expectancy, as if it shares the Queen's fine discernment and knows what makes the difference between what is merely diverting, and what is worthy of royal acclaim.

The Queen processes to her throne and sits upon it with great exactness, and her ladies arrange themselves around her. When all are assembled, and after much bowing and flummery, the play begins. After a few moments, I see that this is a work of the direst cruelty. And I form the opinion that the playwright – whoever he might be – is nothing

better than a rat-souled scoundrel who thinks that belittling a woman will make him twice the man. He is not content that a woman has no more freedom than a house-dog. Nor that she does not even own the chair she sits upon, nor go to school, nor follow a profession (unless she is a widow who must work in her dead husband's place). No. He must make a mock of her, and push her down still further, till her face is squashed into the street-mud. And what grates such fellows most of all is one like me: a woman with a fiery spirit, and a quick tongue.

He makes his Katherine bold, only to call her 'Kate' and starve her of both food and her right name. '*What, did he marry me to famish me?*' she asks, and I see that it is so. A beggar is better treated than a scolding wife. If a woman is wise, she knows when to speak out and when she must be silent. Even the Queen herself plays a careful game, hiding behind paint and posture. Me? I am never quiet enough.

There is a rustling all around me as courtiers shift and make way. The consort divides like the Red Sea, and one of their number, my pretty cousin Alfonso Lanyer, drops his recorder. He catches my eye and winks at me, and I pretend not to see him. Alfonso is distinguished not by his playing but by two bad habits: womanising and losing money at dice.

The cause of the commotion is the arrival of my lover, Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon, a man whose very tread makes all around take notice. Upright and soldierly, as this was his profession for many years. He does not suffer fools; he does not suffer anyone. Excepting only the Queen (who is his cousin) and me. He is forty years older than I am, so some may think we are like May and December in the old stories. Yet we were lovemaking this afternoon. Afterwards, he washed and clothed me with his own hands in the fine new dress I am wearing now. The farthingale is even wider than I am used to, so it seems I have a whole chamber swinging round my hips. The skirts are Bruges satin, of popinjay blue, and the sleeves are tinselled silk, stitched with narrow

snakes of silver. As a final gift, he coiled my hair into a caul of sapphires. When I looked in the mirror, my reflection was so perfect that it made me afraid. I, who am not afraid of anything.

I kiss him when he sits beside me.

‘God’s blood, this is a rum play, by the looks of it,’ he whispers. ‘What’s it all about? Can’t he find a better jade to please him?’

I put my fingers to my lips. ‘She won’t obey him, sir,’ I mutter into his ear. ‘He is hooked in by her haughty ways, and then sets out to punish her.’

‘What nonsense,’ says Hunsdon, rather loudly. ‘A man must choose a woman that suits his fancy, not seek to change some baggage that does not. Fellow must be a barking fool.’

‘Hush, my lord,’ I say. There is laughter and I cuff him lightly on the shoulder. He seizes my hand and holds it in both his own.

But then I am caught by Katherine’s voice.

*‘Such duty as the subject owes the prince,
Even such a woman oweth to her husband,
And when she is forward, peevish, sullen, sour...’*

She speaks the words of a woman beaten, or pretending to be beaten, which is much the same.

*‘And not obedient to his honest will,
What is she but a foul contending rebel,
And graceless traitor to a loving lord?’*

‘I have another gift for you,’ whispers Hunsdon, pulling me closer. ‘A waistcoat of quilted silver sarsanet.’ For a soldier, he has a cunning eye for fashion.

‘My lord! Another present?’

‘I will give it to you when you come to my rooms. Tonight?’

‘If you like.’

He squeezes my hand.

After the play is finished and Kate is crushed and made the most obedient of wives, there is much clapping and cheering. The Queen raises her hand. She is smiling, but her eyes are cold.

‘We want to see the playwright!’ she commands. ‘Where is he? Let him step forward!’

He comes from behind a pillar, slightly hesitant. ‘Your Majesty,’ he says, with an actor’s bow. He is tall, lean and watchful, with deep-set eyes. And artful in his dress, with gold earrings and fine gloves.

She regards him for a moment, her smile in place. ‘A bawdy tale, more fit for a country inn than for a monarch and her great Court, would you not say?’

He bows again. He looks pale. ‘I would say there is low life in it, and high-flown characters too, such as the person of Bianca.’

The Queen’s smile disappears. ‘A lesson, if anyone is listening, that might teach a lady to beware of being fenced in for a wife. First they trap you, then they seek to change you. And those of us with a handsome dowry must be wariest of all.’

Her ladies giggle at this, shimmering in their silver robes.

‘It is a fable, Your Majesty, not taken from the life.’

This is in the nature of a contradiction. The room gasps, silently. All eyes are on the Queen’s face. Her expression is blank, her vermilion mouth a flat line. ‘We do not need a lesson from you in the antecedents of your little drama. There is nothing new under the sun, least of all your plot.’

Then, with a sudden smile, her mood seems to change.

‘We are grateful to you for showing us what we already know. Sometimes, in our experience, this is desirable in a drama. Sometimes we want fairyland, and wild diversion spread before us, and sometimes we wish to be confirmed in

our most sensible opinion. Our opinion being, in this case, that marriage favours men.'

The playwright, looking ill at ease, bows again.

'Was it not your intention? To show women the dangers of the married state? To have us run from such enslavement, in which our husband will be our lord and master in the eyes of God?'

The playwright clears his throat. 'I intended, Your Majesty, to tell a good tale of an unruly woman, who found her true vocation in the –'

The Queen interrupts him. 'Do you have such a wife?'

He blinks. 'Such a...?'

'Such a one as this. One "peevish, sullen, sour" who does not know her place.'

'Her place, Your Majesty, is in Stratford, and mine is in London.'

There is a silence for a moment, then the Queen begins to laugh, and all around her laugh too. The grinning players look sideways at the poet. The Queen flips her hands, dismissing him, and the audience breaks apart in a clamour of excited talk. It is a gay scene. The new play is a success.

Hunsdon sweeps off to consult with Her Majesty on some urgent matter, and I find myself alone in the great hall, sitting stiffly on a stool. All I can think of is this Katherine and her plight, and the cruel way that she was brought to heel.

I feel a presence, shadow-like, and turn my head. It is the playwright. He bows, even more deeply than he had done before the Queen. I stand up, my bright skirts whirl, and the stool falls over.

'I know you,' he says, which is hardly courtly.

I nod.

'Aemilia Bassano.'

I nod again.

'I've seen you... talking...'

I curtsy, mockingly. Wonders will never cease – a comely woman who can speak.

He takes a step nearer. 'So... brightly. So... full of erudition. I've heard you quoting Ovid. Like a scholar!'

I will tell him nothing. I will not say they brought me up at Court. I will not say I am a musician's orphan. I look at him, his dark-rimmed eyes. What is he after? Most men leave me alone, fearing the wrath of Hunsdon. But this one has a reckless look to him.

'Why are you so silent?' he asks.

'I'm silent when I need to be. If it were otherwise, I'd be a fool.'

'Silent with Lord Hunsdon?'

'That's no business of yours.'

'But you speak with him?'

'Of course I do! I'm not the Sphinx.'

He looks me up and down. 'The words you choose must be poetical indeed. To earn such splendour.'

'I am the Lord Chamberlain's mistress.'

'And for that great rank you sold your virtue?'

'How dare you speak like that to me?'

He waits, as if expecting me to say more, but I do not oblige him.

'Silent again?'

'I have nothing to say to you.'

'And yet, I can see you thinking.'

'Oh, surely! My thoughts are there for all to look upon, because my head is made of glass.'

'I believe that you say very little, compared to what is in your mind.'

'You have no idea how much I talk, or what I say. You don't know who I am, or what I know. But, as your play showed us, if she is to prosper, a woman sometimes needs to act the mouse. Wasn't that your message? Better a pliant mouse than a wicked shrew?'

'Are you such a one? A secret, wicked shrew?'

I breathe deeply, wondering that my heart is beating so loudly, my face burns and yet I shiver with rage. And

then the words pour out. 'I wish that you had killed poor Katherine! I'd rather you had abused her in the Roman style, and made her eat her own children baked inside a pie! Why give her fine and dazzling speeches, only to gag her and make her drab?'

He boggles at me in disbelief. 'I... *what* do you say?'

'There's not a scene in your bloody *Titus* that made my heart weep as did this dreadful tale! Shame on you, for humbling that brave soul!'

'*What?*'

'Shame on you. Your play is cruel, and beast-like, sir.'

He smiles slowly. Then he turns and strides away. When he reaches the door, he calls out over his shoulder, 'You are the most beautiful woman at Court. But I expect you know that. There's no one else comes near you.'

My head reels, my guts are water, but I gather myself, right the stool and say, 'That poisonous play is what passes for poetry, is it? If you are in the company of Men and strut in hose?'

He stops, one hand on the door handle and turns to look at me.

I know I have said too much already, but it seems I can only carry on. 'Some lame tale of witless, vile humiliation? A woman-hater's boorish jape? I could do better myself, I swear.'

He forces a sort of laugh. It is a strange noise, almost like a sob. Then he comes back and stands in front of me. He is slightly too close. His eyes are angry, but for a moment he says nothing. Then he says, 'I wish you joy of Hunsdon and your perfumed palace bed.'

'Thank you, sir. In that, I shall oblige you.'

He hesitates once more, then says, 'You're his mouse, but I would that I could make you my shrew.'

Before I can find the words to answer, he has gone.