

**FULL-LENGTH PLAY: *HELL IS EMPTY AND ALL THE WOMEN ARE
HERE* AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS: ‘SHAKESPEARE IN THE DOCK:
BREAKING THE SILENCE OF WILL’S WOMEN IN
CONTEMPORARY THEATRE’**

by

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A thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham for the degree of
MRES PLAYWRITING STUDIES

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September 2014

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ABSTRACT

This thesis comprises an original full-length play, *Hell is Empty and All the Women are Here*, and a critical analysis of the same play: 'Shakespeare in the Dock: Breaking the Silence of Will's Women in Contemporary Theatre'. Taking inspiration from William Shakespeare's treatment of the tragic heroines in his own plays, *Hell is Empty and All the Women are Here* interrogates what would happen if Shakespeare was placed at the mercy of the aggrieved women he created.

The critical essay analyses the play through three different lenses: Strategy, Form and Context. The Strategy section recounts how *Hell is Empty and All the Women are Here* was taken from initial idea to complete theatrical text, focusing on the research carried out into representations of female oppression and the demonisation of strong women in Shakespeare's plays. Form looks at the dramatic techniques present within the text such as Action, Character and Format, whilst Context examines the play in relation to other new writing and the recent surge in feminist appropriations of Shakespeare.

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HELL IS EMPTY AND ALL THE WOMEN ARE HERE

A new play by Hannah Roe

'If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?'

- The Merchant of Venice, William Shakespeare

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Cordelia, early twenties

Desdemona, early twenties

Gruoch, late twenties

Juliet, mid-teens

Lavinia, late teens

Ophelia, mid-teens

Will, early fifties

Hecate, early forties

The action of the play takes place in Purgatory, April 2014. The set design should be evocative of a modern-day prison. Characters can have any accents apart from Will who should preferably speak with a thick Warwickshire accent.

Act One; Scene One

A dormitory in Purgatory. Two small barred windows high-up on the far wall. Six single beds, each covered with the same grey bed linen. Six bedside tables adorned with their own reading lamps and bits of personal paraphernalia. The cold laminate floor is dotted with clothing, odd socks and shoes.

Lights up; it is early morning. Cordelia, Desdemona, Gruoch, Juliet, Lavinia and Ophelia are still sleeping. Then an alarm goes off; the women grumpily protest and the alarm continues to drone until they have all managed to at least sit up. The alarm stops but its echo still hangs in the air while the women all make various attempts to shake off sleep.

Desdemona: *(Through a yawn)* It's good to know that after four-hundred years, there's still one thing that can be counted on...

Ophelia: What's that?

Desdemona: The rate of your snoring on the Richter scale!

Ophelia: How many more times! I don't snore – it's her! *(She points at Cordelia)*

Cordelia: If passing the blame makes you feel better...

Ophelia: I – don't – SNORE!

Desdemona and Cordelia flash each other knowing looks. The women begin to rise from their beds, sleepily change out of their pyjamas and into their day clothes. Each individual outfit is finished off with the tabard of a prison inmate.

Juliet: You know, I had the weirdest dream last night...

Cordelia: Oh, here we go!

Juliet: Fine, I won't tell you.

Cordelia: You'll get no complaints from me.

Juliet: I love that sunny disposition you have in the mornings, it's so refreshing (!)

Lavinia: What was your dream about?

Juliet: Right, so, there was this storm, and I was on a ship but the ship was wrecked in the storm and then I was on this island, and there were monsters and fairies living on it and my old man was there – but he'd like grown a proper beard and looked about eighty –

Desdemona: You've been doing it again, haven't you?

Juliet: What?

Desdemona: Reading before bed, you always have ridiculous dreams when you read before bed.

Juliet: Well I couldn't get to sleep so I read (*mouthed, so Gruoch doesn't hear*) *The Tempest*.

Desdemona: That garbage!

Cordelia: (*Hushed*) Probably best not to let on to "Her Ladyship" that you've been fraternising with her nemesis again.

Juliet: God's sake, it's only reading! It's not like I'm sneaking out every night for a cheeky shag with him!

Lavinia: Ewww!

Desdemona: You're disgusting.

Gruoch *all of a sudden comes out with a forced, throaty cough. The other women ignore her.*

Ophelia: Well I slept like a baby!

Cordelia: Could say you slept like a dead person...

Ophelia: I *am* a dead person?!

Cordelia: I know. It was a joke.

Ophelia: Oh. Haha!

Cordelia: Wasted, completely wasted...

Gruoch *coughs again, but louder.*

Juliet: Wonder what's for breakfast today.

Desdemona: I'd kill for pancakes.

Ophelia: With maple syrup...

Lavinia: Bacon!

Cordelia: They only do pancakes for special occasions – enjoy your porridge, girls!

Desdemona, Ophelia and Lavinia *groan. Gruoch coughs again, this time even louder and more dramatically.*

Desdemona: And how did *you* sleep, Queenie?

Juliet: She stayed put again last night, think we can stop tying her to the bed now...

Gruoch *issues a final, overly theatrical cough; she clutches her throat, gasps for breath and collapses on the floor, motionless. Lavinia and Ophelia squeal and rush to her side.*

Cordelia: Ignore her, she's fine.

Lavinia: Someone must be reading her story, she's died again!

Desdemona: Last time I checked, it wasn't choking that killed her (!)

Ophelia: (*Leaning over Gruoch and tapping her cheeks*) Helloo? Helloo-oo? Wakey, wakey, rise and shine!

Gruoch *springs back up, fighting off Ophelia's hands.*

Gruoch: (*Sarcastically*) Thank you! It's nice to know I'm not *totally* invisible after all!

Cordelia: What's your problem?

Gruoch: Well I don't know, what could *possibly* be my problem!? I mean, it's a new day, the sun is shining, I'm a whole year older and not one of you's even bothered to wish me 'Happy bloody Birthday!'

Desdemona: (*Catching on*) Ohhhh, yes, yes, it is your birthday, isn't it... Sorry, slipped my mind.

Lavinia: Happy Birthday! Sorry I forgot.

Ophelia: To be fair, we have all just woken up. It takes a good half hour before my brain starts functioning in the morning.

Cordelia: And even then, you're lucky to get a useful response from her!

Ophelia: Witch.

Juliet: Happy Birthday, you old hag. How many years is it now?

Gruoch: (*With grandiosity*) Four-hundred and thirty-seven!

Desdemona: Darling, you don't look a day over twenty-nine!

Gruoch: Bless you.

Ophelia: That means we might get pancakes after all!

Gruoch: Great, so I'm a meal ticket now...

Ophelia: Oh, and Happy Birthday!

Gruoch: Better late than never.

Cordelia: That's her middle name!

Ophelia: Full of it today, aren't you...

Gruoch: Anyway, back to me! So I'm guessing as been as y'all got struck with a bout of amnesia overnight, I don't have any presents to open?

Desdemona: Erm...

Lavinia: That would probably be a fair assumption...

Ophelia: I can give you my dessert later on if you want?

Gruoch: Right, so far I've got one pudding, anyone got any advances on pudding?

Cordelia: I can give you that jumper of mine you said you liked the other day?

Gruoch: I was being polite... It was the ugliest goddamn thing I've ever seen.

Cordelia: Oh, take a day off!

Juliet: How about I write you a song?

Gruoch: I think I'd rather take the jumper...

Juliet: Or if you prefer I could express my birthday wishes to you through contemporary dance?

Gruoch: Now you're taking the piss!

Juliet: No, really; watch...

Juliet puts on a hilarious physical display of wild waving, leaping, thrusting and swaying. Cordelia and Desdemona bury themselves in each other's shoulders laughing, Lavinia and Ophelia look on in awe and Gruoch hangs her head in disdain. When Juliet finishes, Ophelia is the only one who applauds.

Ophelia: Brava!

Cordelia: Wow...

Desdemona: That was so... so...

Lavinia: Energetic...

Desdemona: Energetic... yes, good word...

Juliet: (To **Gruoch**) My gift to you, my lady Queen.

Gruoch: You're a daft cow, I'll give you that.

Juliet: Oh, don't pretend you didn't love it.

Gruoch: Love may be slightly too strong a word...

Juliet: Made you laugh though...

Gruoch: I was *entertained*, put it that way.

Juliet: (To *everyone else*) Beat that for a present, bitches!

Desdemona: I think she'd have just taken a hug, to be honest, you didn't have to go all *Darcey Bussell* on her.

Gruoch: No, no hugging, I don't do hugs!

Desdemona: *(Playfully)* What's that now?

Gruoch: I – Do – Not – Hug.

Desdemona: Oh, really... *(She begins to advance towards Gruoch with her arms outstretched)* Let's see about that.

Gruoch: What are you doing?

Desdemona: It's your birthday, everyone needs a hug on their birthday.

Gruoch: Take one more step towards me and you'll be getting a Glasgow kiss, my girl!

Juliet: *(Cottoning on to Desdemona's game)* Oh come on, let's all have a group hug in honour of your birthday...

The other women start to pursue Gruoch with their arms outstretched.

Gruoch: I'm warning you...

Gruoch dodges away from them and runs; the other girls follow and begin chasing her around the room. They run over the beds and Gruoch throws obstacles in their path to thwart them.

Desdemona: There's five of us and one of you, you won't get away with it!

More chasing. Eventually Desdemona grabs hold of Gruoch's arm and dives on top of her, with Gruoch kicking and wriggling. The other girls pile on; Gruoch is overpowered and submits to the group hug.

Gruoch: Oh, you all think you're so cute, don't you! *(She pulls herself free)*

Desdemona: Well don't say we didn't try to make up for forgetting your birthday!

Gruoch: An apology was enough!

Desdemona: Oh cheer up, you miserable arse.

A dinner bell sounds.

Gruoch: *(Smiling)* Come on, I'm starving. Let's go eat.

She exits, followed by the other women.

Blackout.

Act One; Scene Two

*A canteen. There is a self-service buffet station upstage and several tables and chairs dotted around the room. A television mounted on the wall quietly broadcasts a news channel. **Gruoch, Desdemona, Juliet, Cordelia, Ophelia and Lavinia** enter. They help themselves to trays, tea, coffee, fruit squash, porridge, bread, etc.*

Ophelia: No pancakes then...

Cordelia: (*To Gruoch*) Looks like we're not the only ones who forgot your birthday.

Gruoch: Bastards...

Desdemona: Just as well the porridge looks particularly tempting today then! (*She spoons some claggy porridge into her bowl and it lands with an unappetising splat*)

Lavinia: (*Fiddling with the toaster*) Anyone else for brown toast?

Juliet: Me please. Who else is having coffee?

Cordelia: Let me guess, the Italians?

Desdemona: Please. Double espresso.

Lavinia: Latte please.

Cordelia: I really don't know how you can drink that stuff.

Juliet: Says you with your dishwasher!

Cordelia: Can't beat a good cup of English tea!

Lavinia: (*To Gruoch*) Why don't you go and sit down? I'll bring yours over.

Gruoch: Finally, some special treatment!

Juliet: I'll draw a smiley face on your toast, how's that for special treatment?

Gruoch: Touching, really (!)

Desdemona: (*To Gruoch*) Join those tables up, will you, so we can all sit together?

Gruoch: I'm not lifting a finger, it's my bloody birthday!

Desdemona: It's just moving a couple of tables...

Gruoch: I'm an old woman now, I can't indulge in any strenuous activity.

Desdemona: Bollocks! Just do as you're told.

Gruoch: And who are you, my mother?

Desdemona: Thankfully, no. I just think it's a small ask when we're letting our own breakfasts go cold while we prepare yours.

Gruoch: Well if it's such a hardship, don't do it.

Desdemona: Look; are you going to move those tables or do I need to spit in your tea?

Gruoch eyeballs **Desdemona** and pushes two tables together, arranging six chairs around them.

Gruoch: Happy?

Desdemona: Thank you, *Your Majesty*.

Enter Hecate, the warden of B Wing.

Hecate: Morning ladies.

Women: (*Mumbled*) Morning / Morning Cate.

Hecate: You're all in early.

Gruoch: Thought we'd beat the rush, get it while it's hot, you know.

Hecate: I see. You being waited on today then?

Gruoch: It's my birthday, special privileges.

Hecate: Nice, many happy returns.

Gruoch: Cheers.

Hecate: Anything good for breakfast?

Gruoch: Just the usual. Chef obviously didn't get the memo about pancakes on birthdays.

Hecate: Ah, shame.

Gruoch: You know, to make up for that little oversight, you could do me a favour...

Hecate: I could, could I?

Gruoch: How's about getting us some booze in for later?

Hecate: Booze? How much?

Gruoch: Couple of bottles each? A cake wouldn't go amiss either, if you're feeling generous.

Hecate: I'll see what I can do, no promises mind.

Gruoch: I appreciate it.

Hecate: (*Sitting down*) So how've you been?

Gruoch: How'd you mean?

Hecate: How you sleeping these days?

Gruoch: Fine.

Hecate: Sure?

Gruoch: I said fine.

Hecate: Okay, good... And how's everything else?

Gruoch: What is this, 'Twenty Questions'?

Hecate: It's my job to check up on you.

Gruoch: I don't need checking up on.

Hecate: So you've been going to those anger management classes I sorted for you then?

Gruoch: 'Course.

Hecate: You're lying.

Gruoch: Am I?

Hecate: I know you haven't.

Gruoch: So why ask me when you already know the answer?

Hecate: I was giving you the opportunity to be honest with me.

Gruoch: Oh, piss off. You're ruining my day.

Desdemona: (*Approaching the table*) Well I hope you're hungry, birthday girl, because we have got you a feast!

Hecate: (*Standing*) I'll leave you to your breakfast, ladies.

Hecate exits. *The women all take their seats.*

Gruoch: (*Straightening up*) So what you got for me?

Lavinia: Tea, milk, two sugars, white toast with lashings of butter and strawberry jam and porridge with a drizzle of honey!

Gruoch: How very gourmet! (*To Juliet*) Where's my smiley face!?

Juliet: (*Through a mouthful of porridge*) Hrrm?

Gruoch: You said you'd put a smiley face on my toast, where is it?

Juliet: Oh... Here: (*She sticks her finger into the jam on Gruoch's toast and proceeds to draw a smiley face in it. She licks her finger triumphantly when she's done*)
Voila!

Gruoch: Nice...

Lavinia: I hope your hands were clean.

Cordelia: Yeah, you better have washed them after touching that filth you were reading last night...

Gruoch: Not *Lady Chatterley's Lover* again!

Ophelia: Oh, no, something much worse!

Desdemona: That's enough now, girls...

Gruoch: Not *Fifty Shades of Grey*?

Cordelia: Worse still...

Desdemona: I said enough.

Gruoch: Wait a minute, I want to know!

Desdemona: It's nothing you'd be interested in...

Juliet: Yeah, load of rubbish really. (*She glares at Cordelia*)

Ophelia: (*Giggling*) I'll say!

Desdemona: *Quiet!*

Silence round the table apart from the clattering of spoons in bowls.

Gruoch: (*Lowering her spoon*) Is anyone gonna explain to me what the hell that was all about?

Desdemona: It's nothing, don't worry about it. Finish your breakfast.

Gruoch: Not until someone tells me what's going on.

Juliet: I just read a bit before bed, that's all. Didn't know it would be so controversial.

Cordelia: How's about you tell her *what* you were reading?

Pause.

Juliet: (*Mumbled*) *Tempest...*

Gruoch: Come again?

Juliet: *The Tempest!*

Pause.

Gruoch: Him... You were reading *him!*?

Juliet: Oh, please don't overreact!

Gruoch: Why would I overreact? I mean, you were just reading, right?

Juliet: Right...

Gruoch: So why should I have a problem with you reading?

Juliet: Well, you shouldn't...

Gruoch: No... Maybe I shouldn't. But do I have to remind you why I might have a *little* problem with that?

Juliet: No, you don't.

Gruoch: Oh, really!? ‘Cause it seems to me like you’ve forgotten...

Juliet: I haven’t forgotten...

Gruoch: Oh, right, okay – so why *do* I have a problem with that?

Juliet: Because (*mimicking Gruoch’s voice*) “*he’s a murdering misogynist bastard with no balls and a tiny cock*”.

Gruoch: Are you finding this funny?

Juliet: It is a bit funny...

Gruoch: Is anyone else laughing?

Juliet: I just think you’re flying off the handle for no reason!

Gruoch: No reason!?! Really!?

Juliet: I’m not condoning what he did to us just by reading his words!

Gruoch: His words are what killed you, Juliet! You shouldn’t want anything to do with him!

Juliet: You’re like a dog with a bone, you just can’t drop it, can you!?! Over four hundred years on and you’re still as bitter about dying as the day you arrived here!

Gruoch: That’s because for over four hundred years, I have been defined by what that monster made me!

Juliet: Then you are giving him what he wants by letting it bother you! You are the only one defining your own misery!

Gruoch: Do not make this about me...

Juliet: Well I don’t see anyone else going off on one!

Gruoch: You’ve betrayed us all!

Suddenly Juliet lets out a pained cry and clutches her chest.

Lavinia: What is it? What’s wrong?

Juliet: (*Through clenched teeth*) GCSE English – Cardiff – little ginger kid – reading Act V, Scene iii.

Lavinia: Hold my hand, it’ll pass in a second.

Juliet pants and squeezes Lavinia’s hand.

Ophelia: Do you want a glass of water?

Juliet: I'm fine – thanks – it's easing off now.

Gruoch: You see!? That's why you should hate him. Four centuries of waiting to die all over again.

Juliet: I do – hate him. I just – don't see the point – in letting that hatred – rule my life.

Cordelia: Or death, as the case may be...

Lavinia: (To **Juliet**) Are you okay now? Do you need to go and lie down?

Juliet: I'm fine, I just need another coffee!

Desdemona: I'll go.

Desdemona walks upstage and fixes **Juliet** a black coffee. Silence apart from the sound of a kettle boiling and the muffled television.

Television: *'Celebrations are in full swing all over the world today in commemoration of the four-hundred and fiftieth anniversary of William Shakespeare's birth...'*

The women all turn to look at the television.

Gruoch: Turn it up.

Ophelia: Who's got the remote?

Gruoch: Turn it up!

Cordelia: Here... (She takes the remote from the next table along and turns up the television)

Television: *'Unanimously regarded as the world's greatest ever writer, William Shakespeare is four and a half centuries old today. Crowds have gathered in his hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon and in many major cities the world over to be part of this large and extravagant birthday party. This just goes to show that although it may be old, Shakespeare's work certainly hasn't grown weary, and that he is more popular and well-loved four-hundred and fifty years on than he has ever been...'*

Desdemona, Juliet, Lavinia, Ophelia and Cordelia begin to lose interest in the news story and talk amongst themselves. **Gruoch** remains transfixed by the screen.

Ophelia: Could they be any further up the bloke's arse?

Cordelia: They're going on about him like he was a war hero or something!

Desdemona: That's today's news for you – glorifying everything and everyone.

Lavinia: Gru, come and sit down, your cuppa will be cold.

Gruoch: (*Not hearing her*) Doesn't it make you sick? Seeing all those people worshipping a man we know to be a killer? How can they have got him so wrong? How can they love him? How is it justified that he should live forever, and we should die? How is that right!?

Lavinia: Because we're nothing to them. We're just ciphers.

Gruoch: (*Composure slipping*) But *how* is that okay!?! He *ruined* all of us! The man has literally got away with murder! His name should be dripping with infamy, not gleaming in lights all across the world!

A news reporter on the television screen is now interviewing a young woman.

Television: '*Why don't you tell me what it is you love about William Shakespeare?*'

Woman: '*I think he wrote great roles for women. Lady Macbeth, Beatrice, Cleopatra, Rosalind... He created female characters that were strong and exciting in a way that I don't think any writer has been able to emulate since...*'

For Gruoch, this is the final straw. She picks up a chair and screams as she throws it at the television. The women jump and some spring up from their seats in shock. The screen of the television is smashed by the blow and the sound from it ceases; the only thing it emits now is grey smoke. Hecate rushes onto the stage, looks at the damage and then at Gruoch.

Hecate: With me. Now.

Hecate exits, followed by a seething Gruoch. The other women look on nervously.

Blackout.

Act One; Scene Three

Back in the women's dormitory. **Gruoch** is lying on her bed, throwing and catching a pair of balled-up socks. After a short while, **Hecate** enters with some heavy carrier bags which she places down on the floor with a 'chink'. **Gruoch** doesn't acknowledge her.

Hecate: You calmed down now?

Gruoch says nothing.

Hecate: That was quite a show you put on out there.

Gruoch: It wasn't a show. I didn't do it to be entertaining.

Hecate: Why did you do it?

Pause. **Gruoch** sulks.

Hecate: You know that's the hundredth TV you've written off since you came here? And every time, it's been because someone's mentioned his name.

Gruoch: I'll buy you another one.

Hecate: And that's always your response!

Gruoch: What do you expect me to say!? I'm not sorry.

Hecate: You never are.

Gruoch: Why would I be!? My reaction was tame when you consider what I have been through because of that man!

Hecate: But I can't keep paying for your anger, Gru! You are my responsibility and every time you step out of line, I get a formal warning.

Gruoch: Boo-hoo!

Hecate: For someone as old as you are, you're very childish.

Pause. **Gruoch** ignores her.

Hecate: What's this really about?

Gruoch: Do you really need to ask?

Hecate: It's just... well, I've met a lot of people in my time. People with a real capacity for hatred; people who inhaled it like oxygen. I looked into their souls and all I saw were smouldering red holes where the hatred had started to eat them alive. I see hatred in you, Gruoch, but it doesn't always burn for him...

Gruoch: There is nothing, living or dead, that I hate more than him.

Hecate: But you're not his captive anymore, do you realise that? He's not the one that's been tormenting you for four hundred years. It's you; you hate yourself for not being able to break free from his shadow.

Gruoch: Well, Cate, as much as I appreciate that little psychoanalysis, I'd really like to get back to the girls. This isn't really how I'd planned on spending my birthday.

Hecate: I'm just trying to understand why you're still so angry after all this time...

Gruoch: I guess I'm just not the type to forgive and forget, okay? Are we done now?

Hecate: What would it take for you to get past this?

Gruoch: Nothing that you can give me.

Hecate: I want to help you, stop shutting me down.

Gruoch: What can you possibly do to help me? How can you undo over four centuries worth of pain?

Pause.

Hecate: Tell me what you want more than anything else in the world.

Gruoch: Right now? A huge glass of wine!

Hecate: Seriously; what do you want?

Pause.

Gruoch: Justice.

Hecate: Anything else?

Gruoch: Revenge.

Hecate: Good...

Gruoch: And I want the whole world to forget all about William Shakespeare.

Pause.

Hecate: How would you like the opportunity to get all those things?
Gruoch: Tell me more...
Hecate: Well, just in case it's escaped your attention, I've been known to have a trick or two up my sleeve in the past...
Gruoch: So what do you have in mind?

Pause.

Hecate: I will give you, all six of you, the rest of the day with William Shakespeare. When you're ready, you can summon him directly to you using these words... *(She produces a pen from her pocket and grabs Gruoch's hand to write something on the back of it).* Your revenge on him is to convince him to burn all of his plays. If he agrees, he will erase himself from history and I will lift the curse that condemns you all to perpetual death, meaning you no longer have to experience the pain of dying every time someone reads your story. If you fail, you'll just carry on as you are. Thoughts?

Gruoch: How on earth will we convince him to burn his plays!?

Hecate: By any means you deem appropriate.

Gruoch: Shit...

Hecate: It'll certainly give you both a birthday to remember!

Gruoch: Something like that...

Hecate: Oh! *(She picks up the carrier bags she came in with)* I got you the cake and booze you requested. Something tells me you might all need some Dutch courage...

Gruoch: I think I'll take a bottle now! *(She reaches a bottle out of one of the bags and pops the cork. She hands one to Hecate).* Call it a thank-you present.

Hecate: Don't mind if I do. *(She pops the cork and swigs).* To William Shakespeare!

Gruoch: To William Shakespeare!

They clink their bottles together and take hearty gulps of wine.

Blackout.

Act One; Scene Four

The canteen. Juliet, Lavinia, Cordelia and Ophelia are still sitting round the table. Their plates and bowls are all empty. Desdemona enters with a box of decorations, felt tip pens and coloured paper in one hand and an old CD player in the other.

Desdemona: I knew we still had some bits left over from Christmas! Come on everyone, make a space!

The other girls clear the dirty crockery off the table and dust off the crumbs.

Desdemona: Now we need to work quickly 'cause she'll be back any minute now. So if two of you can start making a banner...

Lavinia: I'll do it!

Ophelia: I'll help.

Cordelia: Can you even spell 'birthday'?

Ophelia: Yeah, it's B-E-R-T-H-D-A-E.

Cordelia: Help us all...

Lavinia: Best leave the spelling to me, love. Why don't you draw a cake and some balloons round the border?

Ophelia: Did I get it wrong?

Lavinia: It was a fair effort, you were only two letters out.

Ophelia: That's better than last time! When it was your birthday, I was six letters out!

Desdemona: Cor, fancy making a 'Pin the Head on the Macbeth'?

Lavinia: Isn't that a bit insensitive?

Ophelia: It's Gruoch's favourite game!

Cordelia: Only if we can play 'Musical Statues' as well!

Juliet: I think we're better off playing 'Musical Corpses'...

Cordelia: Doesn't that put us at a bit of an unfair advantage?

Juliet: It just means you have to fall on the floor and pretend to be dead when the music stops instead of standing still...

Cordelia: But there's no *actual* pretending involved – we *are* dead.

Juliet: It's a GAME!

Lavinia: Come on Delia, where's your sense of humour?

Cordelia: What have I told you about calling me Delia? How would you like it if I called you Lav... Lav... (*Doubling herself*) Lav...atory..?

Ophelia giggles quietly.

Lavinia: Well that's not quite the same, is it? I mean, Delia is part of your name, so it's an abbreviation. If you call me *Lavatory*, that's just mean.

Cordelia: Well you started it, 'Lady of the Loo'...

Lavinia: Rude!

Juliet: Did someone sort out a birthday cake?

Ophelia: And alcohol?

Desdemona: Think I heard Gru ask Cate for them at breakfast.

Cordelia: Oh, well we can kiss goodbye to that then after the stunt she's just pulled!

Lavinia: Where do you reckon she's taken her anyway?

Desdemona: No idea. Can't imagine she'll be much longer though, it's not the first time it's happened. It'll be a quick reading of the riot act and that's all.

Juliet: Suppose it's good timing really, we'd never get this done with her getting under our feet!

Ophelia: What alcohol did she ask for?

Desdemona: Just whatever she wanted, I presume.

Ophelia: I hope she put an akvavit request in for me!

Desdemona: Her birthday – her choice.

Ophelia: But she knows I only drink akvavit!

Desdemona: I'm sure she'll have remembered –

Ophelia: And straws! I wanted straws!

Lavinia: What on earth is akvavit? Sounds like a fungal infection...

Ophelia: It's a Danish spirit flavoured with herbs and spices, *I'll have you know!*

Juliet: Can't spell 'birthday' but she knows her spirits! (*Overdramatically*) The youth of today!

Ophelia: I think you're forgetting which one of us is the *youth*...

Lavinia: You know, it would be so nice to get through just a morning without you all biting at each other! I've seen animals behave with more decorum.

Cordelia: Listen to Mother Nature over there!

Lavinia: Just look at yourselves. It's sad...

Cordelia: And next time, take the silver spoon out of your mouth before you speak. No one can hear what you're saying...

Lavinia: I rest my case.

Desdemona: Enough you two! (*To Lavinia*) Is that banner done yet?

Lavinia: Almost.

Desdemona: Right - (*Looking at Juliet*) help me get these decorations up. Cor, have you made a start on the 'Pin the Head on the Macbeth' yet?

Cordelia: I can't draw, I don't know why you nominated me to do it!

Juliet: Well I'm a brilliant *artiste* so step aside! You can put the decs up.

Juliet nudges Cordelia from her seat. Desdemona gestures for Cordelia to join her.

Lavinia: I don't really get why we still celebrate birthdays here. It's not like we technically age, is it? As in we don't get any older, we just stay dead for longer... Not sure that's something I want to celebrate anymore.

Desdemona: I just like the sentiment of it, really. It's one of the only connections we still have to being human. I think it's nice to celebrate them...

Ophelia: (*To Lavinia*) And luckily for you, today isn't your birthday! It's Gruoch's, so suck it up and don't ruin it for her by being all gloomy.

Lavinia: Bit harsh...

Desdemona: You're just a bit too *serious*, darling. You always relate everything back to mortality.

Lavinia: Well, not that I want to use this as an excuse, but mortality is kind of all that's on my mind considering I'm *dead* and all. I apologise if I'm not exactly the *life and soul* of the party!

Desdemona: All I'm saying is that it wouldn't hurt you to let *go* a bit now and again.

Lavinia: Thanks for your concern but I'll "let go" when I'm good and ready.

Desdemona: That went down well...

They all continue with their own activities.

Juliet: You reckon Gruoch's stopped off to distil Ophelia's akvavit as well? She's been gone longer than I thought she would.

Ophelia: Cate's probably giving her wrists a right good slap!

Cordelia: I think she's had them slapped for doing much worse...

Ophelia: She's so badass... I wish I was her.

Juliet: Better start killing some kings then!

Cordelia: That wouldn't go down too well with old Princey-boy...

Ophelia: Like I care about him!

Cordelia: Whoops – touched a nerve!

Desdemona: For the record, Gruoch didn't actually kill any kings.

Juliet: But it was her idea...

Desdemona: Yeah, that looks bad...

Lavinia: Sorry to be “serious” again, but I really do think it's odd that she's not back already.

Ophelia: Perhaps she's asking to move wings? Maybe she's bored of us.

Cordelia: She's probably bored of Lavinia talking about death all the time.

Desdemona: That'll be it!

Lavinia: Have you actually considered that maybe I'm not morbid and it's actually you that are all too cheerful!? You're dead! Your lives are over! How can you be so sickeningly perky about that all the while?

Desdemona: Because it's *good* here! We're safe here!

Lavinia: (*Pulling at her tabard*) You realise you're still wearing one of these things!? We are prisoners, Mona. Had you forgotten!?

Desdemona: I'd rather be in *this* prison compared to the one I had when I was alive! I was battered and humiliated, Lavinia! By the man who was supposed to love me!

Lavinia: At least you died with a full quota of body parts!

Desdemona: Your wounds you were superficial! I still wear mine like a crown of thorns!

Lavinia: How dare you demean what happened to me!? You have absolutely no idea what I went through!

Desdemona: You think you're the only victim here but look around you – you're surrounded by victims. You think you're not better off here – fine. But don't try and taint this place for the rest of us when it's all we have.

Pause.

Ophelia: Mona, Gruoch should be here...

Desdemona: She's the Queen of chuffing Scotland, I think she can look after herself!

Cordelia: But she's as loopy as Ophelia when she wants to be!

Ophelia: *Excuse me?!*

Desdemona: What did you say?

Cordelia: Well, you know... she might have... *relapsed*... If you know what I mean. She might be wandering around on the roof or something, way she was carrying on earlier!

Desdemona: I'm not listening to this.

Desdemona *plugs the CD player in and low party music starts playing.*

Lavinia: You can't honestly think that everything's okay, Mona!? What if Cate is moving her to a different wing!?

Desdemona: There'll be a perfectly legitimate explanation for why she's been held up, I promise you. Make yourself useful and hang these up for me.

Desdemona *shoves some decorations into Lavinia's hands and then begins laying out plates, glasses, napkins and cutlery on the table.*

Lavinia: Do you think maybe one of us should have gone with her? In case Cate comes down a bit heavy on her? She might be feeling vulnerable...

Desdemona: Lavinia, she is a grown woman and I think you – and you (*pointing at Cordelia*) – are being completely disrespectful. Now I don't want to hear any more of your nonsense, she'll be back soon and if this place isn't ready when she arrives, heads are going to roll. So get to work please.

The women get their heads down and engross themselves in their preparations. After a few beats, enter Gruoch laden with the bottle-filled carrier bags. The others don't see her at first.

Gruoch: SURPRIIIIIISE!

The other women startle.

Juliet: You little git!

Juliet, Lavinia, Desdemona, Ophelia and Cordelia *rush over to Gruoch.*

Gruoch: Okay, okay, okay, let a girl get some space!

Desdemona: Where the hell have you been!? Do you have any idea how much you scared us? You should have been back ages ago!

Lavinia and Cordelia *roll their eyes.*

Ophelia: You ruined our surprise!

Gruoch: I know, I know, I'm sorry! But the good news is I come bearing gifts: cake and bevvies for everyone!

The women cheer and unburden Gruoch of the bags. They start opening the cake, slicing it up, opening bottles and pouring drinks. Someone turns the music up slightly.

Lavinia: So where *have* you been all this time!?

Gruoch: Pass me a beer first and I'll tell you.

Juliet: Oh c'mon, the suspense is too much!

Gruoch: Actually, I suggest you all fix yourselves a stiff drink 'cause you're gonna need it!

Ophelia: Right you are! (*She pours more alcohol into her glass*)

Gruoch: Where's my beer?

Desdemona *hands one over.*

Gruoch: Cheers everyone!

Women: Cheers / Happy Birthday, Gruoch!

They all drink. Gruoch waits for them to lower their glasses before speaking.

Gruoch: Okay, I reckon you should get comfy for this...

There is a wave of nervous muttering as the women sit down around the table. Only Gruoch remains standing.

Gruoch: So I've just had a rather interesting chat with Cate...

Cordelia: Took you long enough!

Juliet: We thought she was giving you the boot!

Gruoch: Oh, never! What's a ship without its captain!?

Desdemona: Captain, is it!?

Gruoch: Unofficially...

Ophelia: What did she say, Gruoch!?

Gruoch: Now that's the fun part...

Cordelia: Tell us!

Juliet: Shut your hole and she will!

Pause.

Gruoch: So Cate had a little go at me for the TV incident, tore a strip off me saying that I was making her look bad, etc. Then she asked what it would take for me to see past my anger...

Cordelia: And you said?

Pause.

Gruoch: *(With a smile)* Justice.

Juliet: Uh-oh...

Lavinia: Don't like how you said that...

Desdemona: I dread to think where this is going...

Ophelia: Then what did she say, Gru?

Gruoch: Well, I suppose you could say she gave me my birthday present.

Cordelia: Which is?

Pause.

Gruoch: The best birthday present I could ever wish for...

Desdemona: Oh, spit it out, Gru!

Ophelia: What is it!?

Pause.

Gruoch: *Him.*

Pause.

Lavinia: Who?

Pause.

Cordelia: Gruoch, who?

Pause.

Gruoch: *He's coming.*

Ophelia: Who do you mean!?

Lavinia: Stop being evasive!

Juliet: She's doing it for *effect*!

Cordelia: This better be good!

Pause. Gruoch smiles again, a little sadistically.

Desdemona: Tell us, Gruoch.

Pause.

Gruoch: William Shakespeare is coming.

Lavinia: What!?

Gruoch: Author of our fates, the Bard, Bill the Quill, whatever you want to call him...
He is coming.

Cordelia: Coming where!?

Gruoch: To my birthday party!

Desdemona: No!

Lavinia: Absolutely not!

Juliet: How is that possible!?

Gruoch: Cate's magic. We summon him and he appears!

Cordelia: She's lost it again...

Gruoch: And that's not all...

Desdemona: Oh, God...

Gruoch: At the end of the day, if we can convince him to burn all of his plays and delete himself from history, then Cate will end our curse. We won't have to die anymore!

Desdemona: Really?

Juliet: That is an attractive prospect...

Lavinia: There's no way he'll do that!

Cordelia: You're off your head, Gruoch...

Gruoch: Not this time! Don't you see? This is our perfect opportunity to punish him for what he did to us!

Ophelia: I don't get it...

Cordelia: How do we do that?

Gruoch: "By any means we deem appropriate".

Cordelia: So hold up: you want us to the summon him – our murderer! The man we hate and fear more than any other – you want to summon him HERE!? For what? What can we possibly gain from that?

Gruoch: It's about opportunity, Cor!

Cordelia: But why now!? After so many years – why should we do this now!? We're fine as we are!

Gruoch: Why not now!? This is the chance we thought we'd never have – we can put right all the hideous wrongs he inflicted on us!

Cordelia: But you know how we feel about him, Gruoch. You hate him more than any of us!

Gruoch: I know and that's exactly why I want to look him in the eye and spit in his face!

Lavinia: Does he have to come here? Like, right here, to this room?

Gruoch: He doesn't *have* to. You don't even have to see him if you don't want to. But I do. I think it'll help.

Cordelia: How!? Lavinia's still scared of her own reflection because of what he did to her!

Gruoch: And now she can take her revenge!

Cordelia: No, Gruoch. His being here is the last thing any of us need.

Pause.

Gruoch: Cor, this is the one single chance you will ever have in the rest of your years to ask him your questions... All that anger you feel towards him, all that hatred and revulsion you have inside you: fire it at him! Imagine how satisfying that'll be!?

Cordelia: It frightens me, Gruoch. I don't know how I'd react...

Ophelia: I want to do it. I want to confront him too.

Gruoch: Jules?

Juliet: I think I do want to meet him. Purely out of curiosity.

Gruoch: Mona?

Desdemona: I'm not convinced that it would be in our best interests... We've all adjusted to life without men; a life that I am more than happy with. We've worked so damn hard to recover from our ordeals. I think seeing him would just bring all that old pain flooding back and take us back to the broken people we were when we got here...

Gruoch: But we're reminded of those people we used to be anyway every time we die!

Desdemona: All the women in the world couldn't make him burn his plays! I don't see that there's any way we can come out of this triumphantly.

Gruoch: What do you think, Lavinia?

Lavinia: We shouldn't do it. It's a terrible idea.

Gruoch: Why?

Lavinia: Because he'll crush us, Gruoch! You're building this up to be some incredible, cathartic *thing*! You really think a few 'I hate you's are going to make him fall to his knees, beg our forgiveness and light a match? He's a misogynist, a rapist and a murderer! He'll take one look at us all lined up with our sleeves rolled up and our fists clenched and laugh in our faces. Nothing good will come out of this...

Gruoch: You have more reason than any of us to be terrified of him; I get that. But you'll regret it if you don't have your say, that much I promise you.

Lavinia: Will having my say take back everything I went through? Will it make me forget what I lost? Will it!? No, there is nothing in the universe with that much power, Gruoch. I'm not interested.

Ophelia: (*To Lavinia*) I think you need this the most out of all of us...

Lavinia: If you want to see him, Ophelia, then go ahead! But do not try and change my mind. Count me out.

Lavinia goes to sit on her own.

Gruoch: So Ophelia's the only one brave enough to join me?

Desdemona: Or the only one stupid enough...

Ophelia: Back off, Mona.

Gruoch: Mona, you're my best friend. I know that deep down, you would never refuse this opportunity...

Desdemona: But thinking about it and going through with it are two very different things, Gruoch. I never thought this would actually happen...

Gruoch: All the more reason to take advantage of it!

Pause. Desdemona equivocates.

Desdemona: First sign of trouble and he's out of here, you understand?

Gruoch: Absolutely. None of us will come to any harm.

Desdemona: Okay, I'll do it... But I'm not happy about it.

Ophelia: That's four of us. Come on, Cor, you'll never get this opportunity again, miss it today and it's gone forever.

Cordelia: Jules, top my glass up for me.

Juliet does so and then passes it back. Cordelia downs the contents.

Cordelia: Fine. I'm in. Pass me that bottle!

Gruoch passes Cordelia a bottle of wine which she proceeds to chug from. Juliet goes to Lavinia.

Juliet: Lavinia, no-one's going to force you to do this...

Gruoch: But either way, it will happen. He will be here...

Lavinia: Do what you want. I'm not getting involved.

Desdemona: Let go, Lavinia. You have to let go.

Pause. Lavinia turns to Desdemona.

Lavinia: Do you have any idea what it's like to have your tongue cut out, Mona? How your mouth fills up with so much blood that you can barely breathe? So then you have no choice but to either spit it out or choke it down. Have you ever tasted blood, Mona? And I don't mean just a little bit when you cut your finger and lick it clean; I mean pints of your own warm, metallic blood...

Desdemona: Point taken –

Lavinia: Oh, I'm not finished yet!

Gruoch: Oh, yes you are, Lavinia! (*Slight pause*) You think you're the only one that suffered at his hand, hmm? Have you asked myself or Ophelia what it was like to completely lose control of our own minds? Or Mona what it was like to be constantly accused of something she didn't do and beaten for it? Have you asked Juliet how hard it was loving someone she wasn't supposed to? Or Cordelia how much it hurt to watch her father fade in front of her eyes?

Lavinia: I'm not disputing any of that. I know what he did to you all... But I'm not as strong as the rest of you, Gruoch. I don't have it in me to face him.

Gruoch: You're a coward, Lavinia.

Lavinia: Don't call me that.

Juliet: Gruoch, don't do this -

Gruoch: One little compromise for an eternity of not having to look over your shoulder, an eternity of peace. Freedom from your past. One little thing, that's all it takes...

Juliet: Gruoch, stop -

Gruoch: Pfft, the 'wounded deer' routine is getting pretty old now, my girl. Yes, it was disgusting and horrendous what he did to you – but don't you want to watch him squirm? Don't you want to ask him why he chose you for those things to happen to? Don't you want to torment him like he torments you?

Pause.

Desdemona: We'll make sure he doesn't hurt you again. This is the only way you can lay your demons to rest. Closure, Lavinia... This can fix you if you'll let it.

Ophelia: Don't let him win! You can't let this get the better of you.

Cordelia: I'm not looking forward to it either, you know...

Gruoch: Cowardice is a really ugly personality trait, Lavinia...

Lavinia: Why are you picking on me!? You don't *need* me to be here when he arrives!

Gruoch: It'll make us look weak if we're not in it together.

Lavinia: That's ridiculous!

Gruoch: YOU'RE ridiculous! You're being completely irrational!

Juliet: Well if Lavinia doesn't do it, I won't do it.

Gruoch: Oh, for God's sake...

Juliet: I'm serious. If she doesn't need to see him, then I definitely don't need to. She has way more to hold against him than I do.

Lavinia: Jules, don't be stupid, you wanted to meet him!

Ophelia: Not badly enough, obviously (!)

Gruoch: Not a problem, we'll carry on without you.

Cordelia: I think I'll step down too then, if you don't mind...

Gruoch: What the hell are you playing at?

Cordelia: We all do it or none of us do. We've stuck together for too long to be divided by one man!

Gruoch: Can't you appreciate that I want to do this for all of you? We all have so many questions we're desperate to ask him. There's so much he needs to answer for. We deserve our revenge, girls. It's our right. So if you want to play this ludicrous game, that's absolutely fine. But I'm not doing this because I want a slanging match or because I'm bored. I'm doing this because I am bloody pissed off with how much he was gotten away with over the past however many years. I am pissed off that his treatment of us and others like us has gone unpunished. I want him to pay for his crimes against us. And if I don't have your support, I'll take him on by myself. End of story.

Pause. Lavinia rises.

Lavinia: You really do want this, don't you...?

Gruoch: Of course! Believe it or not, ambition isn't the only thing I'm motivated by. This is a matter of justice, Lavinia. About good triumphing over evil!

Lavinia: What if it all backfires? What if he won't burn them?

Gruoch: Oh, don't think he won't put up a bloody good fight! Our stories brought him fame and fortune and that's all he'll care about. We're not people to him, you said so yourself; just representations, characters. He's not going to care about what he did. But the harder he refuses to light that fire, the harsher we will be in forcing him to.

Pause.

Lavinia: I'm in.

Cordelia: What?

Lavinia: I'm in. Let's do it.

Ophelia: Nah, you're just saying that. Don't feel like you have to!

Lavinia: But I *do* have to! I have to do it for me, and for you; for all of us. And for all the women that ever fell victim to William Shakespeare. Okay, I'm still scared, but I can't possibly stand by and watch you all miss this opportunity. We're doing this and we're doing it together!

Cheers from Desdemona, Ophelia and Cordelia.

Juliet: I knew it; I knew if there was one thing that would make you do it, it'd be anyone else backing out. You'd never put yourself before anyone else.

Gruoch approaches Lavinia.

Lavinia: Sorry for being so ungrateful...

Gruoch: Sorry for calling you a coward.

Lavinia: You were right though, I was being a coward.

Gruoch: You're just scared. We're all scared, Lavinia. No-one's going to enjoy this. Well, I might enjoy it a little – you know me, bit of a sadist... But it took balls

for you to do what you did then, I'm impressed. (*To everyone*) I hope everyone's pouring themselves another drink 'cause it's my friggin' birthday!

Alcohol is passed round and the women drink.

- Desdemona:** So we're finally meeting our maker then. How poetic...
- Juliet:** What are we meant to do with him when he gets here?
- Ophelia:** What do you mean?
- Juliet:** Well we need some sort of plan, don't we? Otherwise it'll be a bloodbath!
- Gruoch:** Sadly the one disadvantage is he's already dead so we can't kill him.
- Cordelia:** Shame...
- Desdemona:** You'd think the bastard was immortal the way they were going on about him on the news!
- Gruoch:** So what do you suggest we do?
- Desdemona:** Chuck him in a cell and throw dog shit at him!
- Cordelia:** Put him in a noose and see how he likes that!
- Ophelia:** Water-board him, give him a taste of what it's like to drown.
- Lavinia:** I don't think violence will get us very far... That just makes us as bad as him.
- Gruoch:** I think Lavinia's right.
- Desdemona:** You do!?
- Gruoch:** Don't look so surprised! As much as all those ideas appeal to me, I think we should go about this in a different way.

Pause while they all think.

- Lavinia:** We could put him on trial?
- Ophelia:** We don't have a courtroom...
- Gruoch:** No, no, I like that, keep going!
- Lavinia:** Well we could set up a courtroom in here; one of us can be the judge and make sure everything stays in order, we can make a dock out of some tables, and then we can all take it in turns to give evidence against him.
- Gruoch:** Great idea, Lavinia! What does everyone else think?
- Cordelia:** It's a good way of making sure we all get a chance to be heard.
- Desdemona:** And it doesn't give him a leg to stand on!

Juliet: The look on his face when he gets here – he'll be hysterical!
Ophelia: I wonder if he's as fat as he looks in his portraits...
Cordelia: I bet he is! All that sitting and writing with no exercise.
Ophelia: Do you reckon he has a beard?
Cordelia: Definitely. I always imagined him stroking it really sinisterly when he was writing my death.

Lavinia *shudders.*

Juliet: How do we go about summoning him then? Do we have to do a spell or something?
Gruoch: Here... (*She holds up her hand*) Cate wrote it down for me:
“A hair from the head of each woman abused,
Plucked and placed into the water.
Then speak the words: ‘We summon the accused’,
And he will appear to face his daughters.”
Desdemona: Sounds pretty straight-forward to me...

Gruoch *goes to the sink at the back of the room to fill a bowl of water.*

Gruoch: Are we ready?

The other women nod.

Gruoch: Gather round then, girls.

They assemble in a semi-circle. The lights dim.

Gruoch: Now everyone take a hair from their heads...

They all do so.

Ophelia: Ow!

Cordelia: She said one hair, Ophelia, not a handful!

Ophelia rubs her head. **Gruoch** holds the bowl out in front of her.

Gruoch: After three, you all know what to say. Then we drop our hairs into the water. Okay? One... two... three...

All: *We summon the accused!*

The CD in the player begins to skip and sparks fly from the broken television. The women sit a while and look around them.

Juliet: Have we done it?

Gruoch: I think so...

Ophelia: So what do we do now?

Cordelia: We wait, I guess...

Lavinia: For how long?

Desdemona: As long as it takes for the spell to work...

They wait a bit. Someone gets up to restart the music.

Juliet: Is it just me who thought he was going appear in a puff of smoke?

Ophelia: Nope, I thought the same.

Cordelia: Bit of an anti-climax, Gruoch, I have to say.

Gruoch: Well how was I meant to know what was going to happen!?! I just read what was on my hand!

Juliet: Should we do something while we wait? We've barely touched the cake and the booze!

Gruoch: Well then you know what to do, Jules! Pass the forks round and let's dig in!

A clatter of cutlery and crockery as the women delve into the cake and make drinks for one another.

Ophelia: Let's play a drinking game! How about 'Ring of Fire'?

Lavinia: We don't have any playing cards...

Desdemona: How about 'Never Have I Ever'? That's always good for a laugh.

Gruoch: I'm up for that. You first, Mona...

Desdemona: Okay... So, Never Have I Ever... had sex with a king.

Cordelia and Gruoch drink. The other girls whoop and laugh. Cordelia whispers in Gruoch's ear, who nods in agreement.

Cordelia: Never Have I Ever... lived in Italy!

Lavinia, Desdemona and Juliet drink.

Ophelia: Never Have I Ever... been married!

All the other women groan and drink.

Gruoch: Juliet, you drink twice 'cause you were nearly married twice!

Juliet: Operative word being 'nearly'!

Gruoch: This is my birthday and I'm telling you to drink! DRINK!

Juliet takes another shot reluctantly.

Juliet: Never Have I Ever fancied one of my husband's mates!

Gruoch drinks. Juliet gasps.

Gruoch: What!? Banquo looked good in a kilt...

Lavinia: But you didn't fancy him!?

Gruoch: If he'd have turned up on *my* balcony, I wouldn't have said no!

Juliet: Ha! And you're not even the one that was aimed at... (*She eyeballs Desdemona*).

Desdemona: Me!?

Juliet: Come on, Mona... I was always rooting for you and Cassio!

Desdemona: There was nothing to root for! He was a nice guy and I wanted to stick up for him because it was the right thing to do.

Cordelia: So the uniform had absolutely nothing to do with it then?

Desdemona: I'm not even going to reply to that. And I'm certainly not drinking. So – Never Have I Ever killed myself!

Juliet drinks unashamedly, followed by Gruoch.

Ophelia: Never Have I Ever -

Cordelia: - Wait... you should have drunk then.

Ophelia: No I shouldn't...

Cordelia: I thought you threw yourself into the brook?

Ophelia: No! I was just off-my-tits mental and thought to myself, 'Hey, why don't I climb that huge willow tree over there!' Then I fell out of it and hit my head on the way down. I don't even know what made me think climbing that tree was a good idea... I'd never climbed one in my life before that! Same reason I never did ballet, or learned to ride a horse – dyspraxia. Zero coordination skills!

Slight astonished pause from the other women.

Gruoch: Moving on! Never Have I Ever... fallen out with my dad.

Juliet: Your dad died when you were three years old. I don't think you can count that one.

Ophelia: Yep, can't have that! That's a forfeit!

Gruoch: Alright, fine! But you're all drinking with me because there's not one of you that can say you haven't done that.

The women drink.

Gruoch: And Lavinia has to down the whole thing because her dad went one step further than falling out with her!

Juliet: Steady on, Gruoch...

Gruoch: Oh bugger off, let's get Lavinia pissed! It's about time Miss Prim-and-Proper let her hair down!

Lavinia: I'll drink to you for your birthday, Gruoch, but I won't be doing anything for your amusement.

Cordelia: Way to ruin the game!

Ophelia: Let's play a new one – Truths – so someone asks a question that everyone has to answer completely honestly. If they lie or refuse to answer, they drink. I'll go: what's the last thing you remember before you died? Mine was climbing the tree.

Cordelia: Mine isn't very pleasant... The hangman did a bit of a botched job with my rope... It wasn't long enough for me. It took slightly longer for my memory to cut out than I'd have liked it too... I remember choking, feeling the blood fill up my head and escape through my nose. Then a searing pain in the back of my neck and all the way down my spine. Then it's all black after that.

Lavinia: That's horrific...

Cordelia *shrugs.*

Desdemona: All I remember is the smell of clean linen. And the softness of the pillow, it had barely been slept on...

Gruoch: I remember feeling weightless... As I stepped off the ramparts of the castle, I knew everything was over, I knew I was gonna be free. It was cold that night... I vaguely, very vaguely, remember catching sight of my breath in the air before I hit the ground. That was probably the last breathe I ever took...

Juliet: Deep...

Pause. Gruoch swigs her drink.

Lavinia: The thing I remember most clearly is my father's face; the way he looked at me before... He looked relieved, comforted by what he was about to do. He couldn't handle the embarrassment of having me for a daughter. I disgraced him...

Pause.

Juliet: Well the last thing I remember is how much shoving a dagger in my chest effing hurt!

The women laugh, Lavinia unenthusiastically.

Cordelia: Okay, so if you had the chance to see anyone again from your mortal lives, who would it be? I'd want to see Edmund...

Desdemona: Wow, that's the last person I'd expect you to say!

Ophelia: Yeah, I thought you'd have wanted to see your dad.

Cordelia: I thought you'd be surprised. But I want to get to the bottom of why destroying his own family wasn't enough, why he felt the need to tear mine apart as well. I mean, he wasn't responsible for all our problems, but I reckon that if he hadn't have stepped in, we'd probably all still be alive.

Juliet: Well mine's easy. The hubby.

Desdemona: Of course.

Ophelia: My mum... She died when I was really young, so I don't remember anything about her.

Juliet: And let's consider that your other options are your pompous, overbearing father who showed way too much of an interest in your personal life, your perfectly-nice-if-a-little-bit-wet brother and the prince that popped your cherry then tossed you aside!

Ophelia: Yeah, Mum's definitely the only person I'd want to see...

Desdemona: I'd want to see Emilia.

Cordelia: Even though she betrayed you?

Desdemona: She didn't know what she was doing. She was just trying to be a good wife...

Gruoch: Well this is not someone I particularly *want* to see again, but someone I feel like I should... Although I'd have no idea what to say and she probably wouldn't want to see me anyway.

Ophelia: Who?

Gruoch: Lady Macduff...

Juliet: Yep... she probably wouldn't want to come anywhere near you. No offence...

Gruoch: None taken.

Cordelia: Lavinia, what about you?

Lavinia: No-one, I don't want to see anyone.

Ophelia: Ah come on, there must be someone –

Lavinia: I said *no-one*! I don't want to see any of them. Not my father, not Bassianus, not my brothers. There's been too much blood... I'd rather just forget them all.

Desdemona: You wouldn't want to hash it out with Tamora?

Lavinia: That's the last thing I'd want.

Juliet: (*Sensing Lavinia's desire to change the subject*) Okay, I have a good one: if you'd have known you were going to die, what would your last supper have been if you could have had anything? I would have had a massive bowl of vanilla gelato and strawberries!

Gruoch: Steak, rare, with roast potatoes and hot buttery spinach!

Desdemona: Yum...

Ophelia: Ham and cheese pancakes followed by apple tart!

Cordelia: Chicken, chips, Yorkshire puddings and loads of gravy!

Ophelia: Ewww, chips and gravy! How British of you!

Cordelia: It's the best!

Desdemona: I'd have some sort of fish, like monkfish or seabass. Pan-fried with garlic and lemon. And I'd wash it all down with a glass of limoncello!

Lavinia: I think I'd have had lasagne. It was my favourite... And chocolate pannacotta for dessert.

Ophelia: Nice one, Jules, now I'm starving!

Juliet: Here, have another slice of cake...

Juliet *cuts her a piece off and hands it over.*

Desdemona: What's everyone's biggest regret?

Lavinia: Not being more adventurous... I never travelled outside of Italy. And it's a beautiful country, don't get me wrong. But it was home. I should have seen more of the world.

Ophelia: Mine's not sticking up from myself. I was a right pushover.

Desdemona: I wish I'd learned to play the violin!

Gruoch: I don't regret anything. I could spend my whole eternity bashing myself over the head with things I didn't do and things I shouldn't have done. So I made a pact with myself to never have regrets, they're too dangerous.

Cordelia: I agree actually. I'd be much happier if I didn't have any regrets. What's the point? We can't do anything about them now.

Desdemona: So what is yours, Cor?

Pause.

Cordelia: Not being a mum...

Juliet: You've never mentioned that before...

Cordelia: I don't think I would have done if there wasn't alcohol involved... Besides, it's not exactly something I want to go around shouting about. Why would I want to talk about something I'll never have?

Juliet: A problem shared is a problem halved... Keeping something like that to yourself isn't good for you, Cor.

Cordelia: Jules, I'm dead, I don't need to worry about what's good for me or not!

Juliet: I think you still should have told someone...

Cordelia: I'm telling you now, aren't I? It's private Juliet, *mine*. It's one of the only things I have to myself these days. And what would you have done about it anyway? You can't give me a child! It's just empty grief and I'm dealing with it. It's not a big deal.

Slight pause.

Juliet: Well my biggest regret is not learning how to make a tiramisu.

Ophelia: *That's* your biggest regret!?

Juliet: Yeah! It's like a rite of passage in Verona, all the women knew how to make it. My mum never showed me how.

Gruoch: So your biggest regret is not making a cake!?

Juliet: Tiramisu isn't a cake. It's a dessert made with coffee, sponge fingers and mascarpone cream. It was his favourite...

Ophelia: Sounds repulsive!

Juliet: Oh it is! But as a lady of Verona, I should really have known how to make one.

Pause.

Cordelia: He's still not arrived, has he?
Ophelia: Perhaps we got the spell wrong...
Lavinia: Maybe he's just refused to come?
Desdemona: Wouldn't surprise me, slippery bastard.
Gruoch: He'll be here.

Pause.

Lavinia: Oh God, I'm not sure about this anymore...
Desdemona: He can't hurt you, Lavinia. Don't get yourself in a state!
Lavinia: I need another drink...

Juliet pours one for her. **Lavinia** puts it to her lips with a trembling hand.

Will: *(Off)* Hello? Is anyone there?

Lavinia gasps and lowers her glass.

Lavinia: He's here!

A few beats, then Will appears. He is thin and frail, dressed in pyjamas with patchy stubble and scruffy hair. He walks slowly, looking around wildly as he tries to make sense of his surroundings. He barely notices the women staring at him.

Gruoch: *(With mock grandiosity)* Ladies and lovelies, allow me to introduce the inimitable William Shakespeare! Don't all bow at once (!)

Pause.

Ophelia: That's really him?
Juliet: Quite the disappointment...

The women continue to watch Will as he staggers forwards. He sees Gruoch first but has no idea who she is.

Will: What the hell is this place? What's going on? Where am I?

Pause. Gruoch smiles.

Gruoch: Oh, honey. You're home.

The women laugh.

Blackout.

Act One; Scene Five

The canteen again. Will and Juliet are the only ones in the room. Juliet keeps as far away from Will as possible.

Juliet: *(Half to herself)* I like how I get to be on baby-sitting duty while the others get stuck in planning the trial.

Will: I don't understand, I was just sitting in my favourite chair having birthday brandies with Tennessee and Henrik then suddenly I'm in this dump... Where am I? Who are you?

Juliet: That would be telling.

Will: Do I know you? Do you know me? You know my name, don't you – that redhead, the Scot – she used my name... How could she know my name!?

Juliet: Beats me...

Will: Please... tell me exactly where I am.

Juliet: You mean they didn't tell you?

Will: They? Who's 'they'?

Juliet: Whoever brought you here.

Will: I'd not seen a soul before I stumbled across you lot.

Juliet: And no one came to collect you...

Will: No, I just turned up.

Juliet: So you really have no idea where you are?

Will: Well, I don't think it's Heaven, I've been there a while and I'd like to think their facilities are better than this... Which leads me to believe it could be Hell... Tell me, girl, which is it?

Juliet: Neither.

Will: Neither!?

Juliet: It's not as black and white as that.

Will: How do you mean?

Juliet: Let's say you're in the grey area.

Will: I'm not following...

Juliet: Well if we're not in Heaven, and we're not in Hell, then where do you think we are?

Pause.

Will: Not Earth?
Juliet: Definitely not.
Will: So you're either an alien or you're dead...
Juliet: Well I'm not an alien!
Will: So you're dead too! Like me!
Juliet: Then where could we possibly be!?

Pause.

Will: (*Realising*) Purgatory...
Juliet: If only I had a gold star (!)
Will: (*Appalled*) What are you doing in Purgatory?
Juliet: Oh, you know, just chillin', kicking back in the afterlife, that sort of thing...
Will: But what did you *do*?
Juliet: I didn't *do* anything, I'm just *here*.
Will: But you must have done something to get stuck between life and death?
Juliet: I'm a literary creation, pet; we're always between life and death!
Will: Now you've lost me...

Pause.

Juliet: You don't recognise me, do you?
Will: Should I?
Juliet: Oh, you should... You made me.
Will: I don't understand...
Juliet: Jesus Christ, how on earth did you become so successful!? Not very bright, are you!? You make Ophelia look like Galileo.

Pause.

Will: Ophelia... I know that name...
Juliet: I should hope so!

Will: But how can you know Ophelia? She's not real, I made her up! She's just a charact- wait, did you say 'literary creation'? *I made you?*

Juliet: Every last bit of me!

Will: Then you're not real either!?! None of this is real, this is all in my head!

Juliet: I'm as real as you. We all are.

Will: There are more of you!?

Juliet: You met us on the way in, remember?

Will: Oh, God... (*Hushed*) But you *can't* be real, it's not possible...

Juliet *pulls a needle from her pocket and holds it up to Will.*

Juliet: Prick me.

Will: I beg your pardon!?

Juliet: Prick me. If I bleed, you'll know I'm real.

Will: Dead bodies don't bleed.

Juliet: My body is buried beneath the soil, a soul can still bleed...

Will: Have an answer for everything, don't you...

Juliet: I'm waiting.

Will *vacillates before walking to Juliet slowly. She hands him the needle and holds up the index finger of her right hand. He hesitates again.*

Juliet: Come on, man! We don't have all day!

Will: I don't want to hurt you...

Juliet *lets out a guttural laugh.*

Juliet: HA! Too late for that, sunshine! What's a needle to the finger when you've had a dagger to the chest!?

Pause.

Will: You're Juliet...

Juliet: The one and only. Now *do it.*

Pause. He pricks her. Her finger bleeds.

Juliet: Told you.

Will: Oh, no...

Juliet: You've been a very bad man, Mr Shakespeare.

Will: What have I done!?

Juliet: Oh, you'll find out soon enough.

*Enter **Gruoch, Desdemona, Cordelia, Lavinia and Ophelia.** **Gruoch** begins directing the women to set out a makeshift courtroom and they act accordingly.*

Gruoch: Right we need a table at the back like this for me to sit at 'cause I'm the judge and I'll also need a chair and something I can use as a gavel. I'd like five chairs in a line on my left and someone needs to arrange some tables on my right to make the dock. The stand is marked with this bottle. *(She finishes the contents of a wine bottle from earlier and places it down on the floor downstage left).*

*The women dash about the stage fulfilling **Gruoch's** requirements. **Will** looks around wildly. **Desdemona** approaches **Gruoch** with a large wooden spoon.*

Desdemona: Best I could do for a gavel, I'm afraid...

Gruoch: I'll make it work.

Cordelia: Ready when you are, *Your Honour*.

Gruoch: Fantastic. Juliet, kindly lead the defendant to the dock. Ladies, please take your seats, the trial is about to begin.

Will: Trial? Who's on trial?

Juliet: *(To Will, pulling his wrist)* This way...

Will: What the bloody hell is going on!?

Will walks clumsily into the dock, not looking where he's going as he is too busy frantically looking round. Once in the dock, he peruses the women sitting opposite him, trying to work out who each one is. Juliet goes to join the others on the chairs and they continue to buzz nervously. Gruoch gets into position at her table and bangs her 'gavel'.

Gruoch: Order! ORDER!

The noise dies down.

Gruoch: William Shakespeare... Too long have I waited to have you in my sights. Tell me, *Billy*, do you have any idea why you might be here?

Will: Not the foggiest!

Gruoch: Well then, allow me to enlighten you: you are to be trialled today before this court. You stand accused of countless violent crimes against women. It is our belief that you committed these crimes remorselessly, fully aware of your actions and /

Will: / Wait, please! I, I can't take all this in... I'm here to stand trial?

Gruoch: That's correct.

Will: But I don't understand what I've done!?

Gruoch: That's why we're here. To make you understand, and to make you pay.

Will: Look, whatever I'm *meant* to have done, can't we just talk about it!? Surely there's no need for all of this!? We're all adults so let's be reasonable; just tell me what you want from me and I'll /

Gruoch: / Your crimes include multiple counts of murder, one count of rape, and several counts of violence and bodily harm; these are heinous crimes, crimes which you should have been punished for long ago /

Will: / You're making no sense /

Gruoch: / I. AM. *TALKING!* You don't make the rules here, old man. You do as we say now. The time will come for you to say your piece, but right now all I need from you is your plea.

Will: My plea?

Gruoch: Yes.

Will: So this is it!? This is the trial!? Where's the jury!? Where's my defence!?

Gruoch: Extenuating circumstances; no jury, no witnesses. As for your defence, I'm sure you'll come up with something.

Will: Oh, sod this! I'm being thrown to the wolves here! You've clearly already decided I'm guilty of whatever nonsense you've conjured up so why continue this *farce*? Just sentence me and stop wasting my time – it is my birthday, you know!

Gruoch: (*Scoffing*) Wasting *your* time? Do you *really* know how it feels to have time to waste? We have waited centuries for this day to come! All we have had to do with our time is *waste it*. How dare you stand there and accuse *us* of wasting *your* time, you pathetic little man!

Desdemona: Don't let him get inside your head, Gruoch...

Pause. Gruoch breathes; relaxes.

Gruoch: (*To Will*) So... how do you plead?

Will: I'm too old for games like this...

Gruoch: How do you plead, Mr Shakespeare!?! You might as well join in our "game" because you are going nowhere unless you do.

Will: Christ...

Gruoch: Your plea.

Pause.

Will: Not guilty, as been as I have no idea what you're charging me with. But it sounds like you're going to do your best to prove otherwise...

Gruoch: The defendant has pleaded 'not guilty' to the charges of which he stands accused. Members of the court, please consider this man's long history of violence and femicide as you deliberate your verdict. (*To Will*) Do you recognise any of the women in front of you?

Will: Juliet and I have met already. The others, no.

Gruoch: Do you know who I am?

Will: The Scottish accent is a bit of a giveaway, I'm afraid.

Gruoch: *Are* you afraid?

Will: Time has taught me never to underestimate a woman, Your Honour... I think I'm ready to take your beating.

Gruoch: We'll see... First complainant to the stand, please.

Cordelia *rises from her chair and walks to the stand with forced poise.*

Gruoch: For the purposes of the trial, could you please state your name?

Cordelia: My name... is Cordelia.

Will shifts uncomfortably at the sound of her name.

Gruoch: And your reason for prosecuting the defendant?

Cordelia clears her throat, a shadow of the woman we have seen previously.

Cordelia: William Shakespeare is a murderer, Your Honour. He killed my father, he killed my sisters, and he killed me...

Will: Hang on a minute...

Gruoch: (*Ignoring him*) Why do you think the defendant targeted you with this assault?

Cordelia: I don't know, Your Honour. I don't think there's any excusable justification for it. He did it for his own entertainment.

Gruoch: In the time before to your death, how would you describe your feelings? Were you happy?

Cordelia: Well, yes, as happy as I could have been. I had not long been married and I'd just reunited with Dad, so yes, I was happy.

Gruoch: And happiness has no place in tragedy, does it not?

Cordelia: I suppose not.

Gruoch: So the defendant snatched that happiness away from you for his own benefit?

Cordelia: That's how I see it, Your Honour.

Will: I can't believe what I'm hearing /

Gruoch: /The defendant was also instrumental in your father's decision to disinherit you, is that right?

Cordelia: I believe so, Your Honour.

Gruoch: And this decision ultimately lead to your death and the deaths of several others?

Cordelia: Yes.

Gruoch: Do you believe your death was necessary, Cordelia?

Cordelia: Absolutely not, Your Honour. I was collateral damage... A spoil of war.

Gruoch: So you didn't deserve the fate you were given by the defendant?

Cordelia: Not by any stretch of the imagination. I never did anything in my life which could be considered punishable by death. Everything I did, I did for my family and I was repaid with a noose around my neck.

Gruoch: You were forsaken by this man – the man who was meant to be your protector – and subjected to a painful and untimely death.

Cordelia: Very painful, Your Honour. He made sure I suffered.

Gruoch *shakes her head in disgust.*

Gruoch: Would you describe the defendant as a misogynist, Cordelia?

Cordelia: Yes, Your Honour.

Gruoch: Do you have any proof to cement this accusation?

Cordelia: All you need to do is look at the body count at the end my story; three of those who died were women and all of our deaths could have been avoided /

Will: / I have a wife and daughters of my own, Your Honour. Surely that's proof enough I'm not a misogynist!?

Cordelia: You abandoned your wife and children, just like you abandoned us! You can't use that as an excuse!

Gruoch: It is evident that family means very little to you, as do the rights of women... /

Will: / I really don't get this... You're characters, *fabrications*! You're not meant to be *behaving* like this!

Cordelia: Oh, would you rather we kept quiet until you gave us permission to speak!? How does it feel to lose control of us, hmm!?

Will: This is crazy, you're not meant to be *real*!

Cordelia: (*Shaking with anger, on the verge of breaking*) Well we *are* real! The sooner you understand that, the sooner you can start understanding what you put us through! We were your living puppets to do what you pleased with; who you simply discarded when you'd had your fill! But the tables have turned now; we're not just your creations anymore. We can think for ourselves! You no longer have the privilege of defining us; we are our own women, and we want revenge!

The women cheer in agreement. Gruoch hammers her spoon on the table.

Gruoch: Silence in court!

Hush falls gradually.

Gruoch: Cordelia, may I ask you about your relationship with your sisters?

Cordelia: Yes, Your Honour.

Gruoch: Was there ever a time when you all got along?

Cordelia: When we were children, yes. But they changed when our mother died and started freezing me out. Dad always told me I reminded him of Mum; they didn't like that.

Gruoch: Would you say the defendant incited their hostile behaviour? /

Will: / That's rubbish, you're asking leading questions!

Gruoch: (*Ignoring him*) Well, Cordelia?

Cordelia: Yes, I would say he did, Your Honour. He's a very manipulative man.

Will *scoffs.*

Gruoch: Do you think it would be fair to surmise that the defendant's dysfunctional familial life lead to his poor treatment of yourself and your family?

Cordelia: I think that's a very fair conclusion, Your Honour.

Gruoch: You're certain that the lethal combination of this and his obvious issues with female strength is what killed you all?

Cordelia *nods.* **Will** *groans.*

Gruoch: So Cordelia, do you believe the defendant is guilty of the crimes he is accused of?

Cordelia: Without a doubt, Your Honour. In my story alone, he murdered three women. He pitted us against one another and made us enemies. My own sisters... He didn't just kill us; he obliterated my family. He's gone on for too long without anyone questioning his misconduct and others have fallen victim to him as a result. He has to pay, Your Honour.

Gruoch: Thank you, Cordelia. Return to your seat.

Cordelia *goes.* **Gruoch** *straightens her table and rubs her face.*

Will: (*To Gruoch*) Blimey, you don't hold back, do you!?

Gruoch: Me? I'm just warming up.

Will: You've certainly done your homework...

Gruoch: I beg your pardon!?

Will: It's very well put-together. Very polished.

Gruoch: Is there a point you're trying to make?

Will: No, no...

Gruoch: If you are even slightly intimating that we've rehearsed this –

Will: I didn't say that. Did I say that? Don't go putting words in my mouth.

Gruoch: (*Fuming, standing up*) Oh, no, sorry, I forgot – that's your job! How does it feel, to hear us all speaking with voices of our own, hmm? I imagine it's quite unsettling for you... Do you want to know why these girls have so much to say for themselves? It's because for hundreds of years, that's all they've had to think about! That's all you left them with when you killed them in cold blood! Is that sinking in at all!? You are looking into the faces of the women you killed and all you can do is sit there, heckling!? You are useless! You are weak, and you are finished!

*All of a sudden, **Gruoch** cries out in pain and nearly faints. **Desdemona** rushes to her side.*

Will: I didn't do anything – that wasn't me!

Cordelia: It's always you.

Will: I didn't touch her! What's wrong with her, is she alright!?

Ophelia: Like you care.

Desdemona: Cor, help me get her to the dorm. Take twenty minutes for a comfort break everyone, she'll be right as rain again in no time. (*To **Juliet***) Do not let him out of your sight.

Juliet: Roger that.

*The lights fade as **Desdemona** and **Cordelia** help **Gruoch** offstage. Blackout. End of Act One.*

Act Two; Scene One

The canteen once more and the concluding part of Will's trial. Will is in the dock and Juliet, Lavinia, Cordelia and Ophelia are sat in their seats. After a few beats, Desdemona enters.

Desdemona: All rise.

The women stand and Gruoch enters, fully recovered. She sits down and the other women follow.

Gruoch: Right, where were we...

Will: Are you alright?

Gruoch: I'm sorry?

Will: Are you alright after... whatever *that* was?

Gruoch: *That*, Mr Shakespeare, was what we have all been cursed to endure for the last four centuries because of you. But really, I've never been better (!)

Will: I don't – I didn't do... /

Gruoch: / The beauty of being your *characters*, old man, is that every time our stories are read or when someone new crawls into our skin, we get to experience the joy of dying all over again... Sounds fun, doesn't it!?

Will: I can't – I can't make sense of all this...

Gruoch: Then let us help you – Juliet, would you like to take the stand please?

Juliet *moves to the stand, looking unsettled for the first time since the trial began.*

Gruoch: Why are you prosecuting the defendant?

Pause.

Juliet: He made me fall in love with my enemy.

Gruoch: Go on...

Juliet: I think he knew full-well that our love was doomed from the beginning, but he still stood by and let us both get killed. My case may not be as strong as the

others, but I can still cite murder as a reason for wanting him punished, Your Honour.

Gruoch: You have a case, that's all that counts. I'm interested to know why you think your story became one of the defendant's most loved pieces of work? He markets it as a tale of 'star-crossed lovers', does that sit comfortably with you?

Juliet: Not entirely, Your Honour.

Gruoch: Why so?

Juliet: Because 'star-crossed' means that we were fated to find each other; but it also means we were fated to destroy one another...

Gruoch: Can you explain what you mean by that?

Juliet: Well, there was just too much against us from the start, it was never going to end well. We came from rival families; they would spill each other's blood in the streets and not think twice about it.

Gruoch: And, of course, there was your arranged marriage to another man...

Juliet: That pillock...

Gruoch: It seems that men were always looking to make you their property, looking to have control of you. Not just your suitors but your family, too. Your father, for example, and your cousin...

Juliet: That is true, Your Honour.

Gruoch: And when you defied your father and chose your own husband...

Juliet: He hated it, Your Honour... He hated me.

Gruoch: Do you think this points to an inherent... flaw... in the defendant's psychology, Juliet?

Juliet: I think it points to many... But mainly, I think it proves that he definitely has a problem with rebellious women, women that refused to hold their tongue...

Gruoch: That's very interesting... Do you believe the defendant knew what he was doing when he put the two of you together? Do you think he consciously tore you apart?

Juliet: Yes, Your Honour. We were both far too young, reckless and impulsive... We cared too much for one another and not enough for other people. It was a toxic, corrosive kind of love that left nothing but disaster behind it. The defendant knew exactly what he was doing when he put us together. He built us up so he could knock us down.

Will: You've got me so wrong...

Gruoch: (*Ignoring him*) Did it ever bother you that the defendant gave you a lover who had previously been infatuated with another woman? /

Will: / How much longer are you just going to sit there and ignore me!?

Gruoch: (*Ignoring him*) Answer the question, Juliet.

Will: You really expect me to listen to all this and not say anything? This is slander – right under my nose!

Gruoch: (*Rounding on Will*) Don't you think you've said enough!? You've spent years and years having the final word! Words are your weapons and I will not give you the satisfaction of using them against these girls this time!

Will: My words are gone, lady. They died with me! I have nothing to use against you.

Gruoch: Well we have plenty to use against you, so stop interrupting and let us get on! Juliet, you were going to tell us how you felt about being given a lover who'd loved another before you...

Juliet: It didn't particularly bother me. I just wanted him so badly and in my eyes, he could do no wrong. It didn't lessen what we had and to be honest, I don't really understand the defendant's motive behind it.

Gruoch: Why do you think the defendant killed you?

Juliet: I think he killed me because he knew there could be no Juliet without Romeo. One couldn't carry on without the other.

Gruoch: So you think the defendant killed you because he thought you were too weak to carry on without the man you loved?

Juliet: I suppose so, yeah.

Gruoch: Therefore do you believe the defendant is a sexist?

Will: I killed off blokes as well, you know! And she was the only woman to die in her story, so there's no way you can pin that one on me!

Gruoch: (*Ignoring him again*) Juliet, do you have anything further to add?

Juliet racks her brains.

Juliet: I'd like to second Cordelia's point about him being manipulative... He lulled us all into a false sense of security by allowing us to fall in love. He fattened us up and then he slowly starved us. He gave us love that was great but it was love doomed to fail.

Gruoch: Do you think you feel the loss of that love more because the defendant gave you very little affection from anywhere else?

Juliet: I think so, Your Honour. My parents were write-offs from the start; they assumed I was stupid and incapable of making my own decisions just because I was young. That sort of environment is suffocating for a child.

Gruoch: So once again, domestic issues seem to be a theme...

Will: Don't bring my family into this.

Gruoch: I'm merely stating facts. Your dysfunctional family life interfered with your writing, you can't deny that.

Will: If it did, it was entirely by accident. I don't want my family implicated in this bloody mess.

Gruoch: Too late for that... Your final statement, Juliet?

Juliet: Everything that man did to us was carefully constructed to cause maximum pain and suffering. He is clever and conniving, and this makes him incredibly dangerous, Your Honour.

Gruoch: You therefore believe the defendant is guilty?

Pause.

Juliet: He is a murderer, Your Honour... But more than anything, I think he treated us so badly for his own material gain; he used our misfortunes to make what he deemed to be good tragedy and this in turn brought him his ill-gotten success. I believe greed to also be a punishable offence.

Gruoch: Thank you, Juliet. You may sit.

Juliet: Thank *you*, Your Honour.

Will: And thank you for throwing me under the bus (!)

Gruoch: Next please.

Ophelia *moves to the stand.*

Gruoch: (*To Ophelia*) For the benefit of the defendant, could you please speak your name?

Ophelia: Ophelia, Your Honour.

Gruoch: And state your reason for prosecuting the defendant.

Ophelia: I have lots of reasons, Gru – Your Honour...

Gruoch: Such as?

Ophelia: Well, like the others, I died because of *him*. And his treatment of me throughout my life proves that he believes all women should be silent and subordinate. He made me answer to men from the moment I was born ‘til the day I died.

Gruoch: Do you refer to the Prince of Denmark?

Ophelia: He’s one of the men I mean, yeah.

Gruoch: He treated you very badly...

Ophelia: Yes, Your Honour. But I really loved him, you know.

Gruoch: And were your feelings reciprocated?

Ophelia: Initially... He said he was going to marry me. But then his father died and he kind of forgot about it...

Gruoch: So Prince Hamlet deserted you?

Ophelia: Yes, Your Honour. We became strangers to one another.

Gruoch: Was the relationship between yourself and Prince Hamlet sexual?

Will: Oh, steady on!

Gruoch: Quiet!

Pause.

Ophelia: It was, Your Honour...

Gruoch: Was it consensual or did the Prince force himself on you?

Pause. Ophelia is on edge.

Ophelia: I consented, Your Honour... But I never would of if I thought he was ever going to reject me. I didn’t think there was any harm in it if we were to be man and wife anyway...

Gruoch: Did you feel used by Prince Hamlet, Ophelia? Did you feel like he took what he wanted from you and then abandoned you?

Ophelia: A bit, yeah... I tried not to hold it against him though, he was going through a really rough time... And I really do think we would have been married if it weren’t for the King’s death and my dad’s meddling.

Gruoch: Ah yes, your old dad. Did you feel used by him too?

Ophelia: In what way, Your Honour?

Gruoch: Well it was his and Claudius' idea to use you to spy on the Prince...

Ophelia: Oh, yes! No I wasn't happy about that, Your Honour. Whether I'd agreed to it or not, either way I was letting down someone I loved.

Gruoch: Tell me more about your father...

Ophelia: Well he was always very over-protective of me, bit of a control freak, to be honest. It rubbed off on my brother too... He warned me against my relationship with Hamlet and told me not to see him again.

Gruoch: Yet he was still happy to use your gender for his political gain!? He may have advised you not to pursue a relationship with Hamlet, but when it came down to matters of the court, he thought it was acceptable to exploit your femininity...

Ophelia: Yep... He was a hypocrite, too.

Gruoch: I would say he treated you like a common whore...

Will: Well you *would* say that!

Ophelia: I just did as I was told. I was so accustomed to having men speak for me that I had no idea how to think for myself. That's why I went bonkers when he died.

Gruoch: So the defendant made you so reliant on men that you went insane without their influence?

Will: There you go, twisting everything!

Ophelia: (*Blanking him*) Yes, Your Honour.

Gruoch: And when you died, you weren't given proper burial or funeral rights, is that true?

Ophelia: Yes, Your Honour.

Gruoch: Why is that?

Ophelia: Because the defendant made my death look like a suicide.

Gasps and low boos from the other women.

Gruoch: And you were therefore robbed of a dignified burial?

Ophelia *nods.*

Gruoch: So he had the audacity to steal away your short life and then refuse you propriety in death!?

Ophelia: (*Saddened*) Yes, Your Honour.

Gruoch: Disgraceful... Does that complete your testimony, Ophelia?

Ophelia: I think so.

Gruoch: Next, please.

Desdemona *gets up from her seat and takes up position. She eyeballs Will with contempt as she does so.*

Gruoch: Name?

Desdemona: Desdemona.

Gruoch: And your reason for prosecuting the defendant?

Desdemona: He abused me. He made me a victim of domestic violence, and it was that which lead to my unjust death.

Gruoch: Could you explain that in more detail?

Desdemona: I suffered both emotional and physical abuse which was devised by the defendant. I endured continuous accusations from my husband concerning my alleged infidelity and was psychologically pummelled on a daily basis about it.

Gruoch: You were beaten by your husband?

Desdemona: Yes... Not sure if he regretted it. I think he was too far gone to realise what he was doing...

Gruoch: Was there any verbal abuse involved? Did he call you names?

Desdemona: A whore, and a strumpet.

Gruoch: Did anyone else ever witness this violence?

Desdemona: There were times when it happened in public. It was humiliating...

Desdemona *falters. Will looks ashamed.*

Gruoch: Take a moment...

Pause. Desdemona regains herself.

Desdemona: I was publicly disgraced and degraded by the men *he* created. My name was dragged through the mud and he made me lose everything.

Gruoch: You were used maliciously as a weapon in a plot of revenge against your husband by a Mr... (*Looking at her notes*) Iago. Is that correct?

Desdemona: Yes, Your Honour.

Gruoch: He was the one who planted the vile thoughts in your husband's head which lead to your murder?

Desdemona: He was, Your Honour.

Gruoch: He used your fidelity against you...

Desdemona: And made me look like the villain. But I maintain even to this day that I am completely without blame!

Gruoch: And on the night of your murder, you asked your friend Emilia to put your wedding sheets on the bed you shared with your husband...

Desdemona: I did...

Gruoch: Was that because you suspected your life was in danger?

Desdemona: I did fear it... My husband's behaviour was growing increasingly more unpredictable and there was a darkness in him that was taking him over. But even to the last, I was a sentimental idiot (!)

Gruoch: Earlier, you described your death as unjust. Do you stand by this?

Desdemona: I do. I was never anything more than a dutiful wife who utterly adored her husband, and I would have done for the rest of my life... But he didn't love me enough. If it hadn't been for the defendant's complete disregard for human feeling and, more importantly, for women, I would still be alive.

Gruoch: What do you believe the defendant's reason was for ending your life?

Pause.

Desdemona: I believe it was intended as a warning, to scare women into submission.

Will: That's bollocks!

Desdemona: It's the truth!

Will: I think you're giving me far too much credit – the things you're all accusing me of didn't even occur to me until now! How can I have realised what I was doing!? How could I have known I was really hurting people!?

Desdemona: Whether you knew or you didn't, you still had the intentions of /

Will: / I didn't *intend* anything! I was just writing sodding *theatre*!

Gruoch: (*Banging her spoon on the table*) Order! Order! Desdemona, do you feel the defendant forced you to tolerate your abuse in silence?

Will: Oh, Christ...

Desdemona: Because of the nature I was assigned by the defendant, I could never speak out about the abuse. He rendered me powerless when he made me passive... All I could do was sit helplessly and wait to die.

Gruoch: So Desdemona, do you believe the defendant to be guilty?

Desdemona: Yes, Your Honour. One-hundred percent.

Will: Surprise, surprise...

Gruoch: Thank you. Could the final complainant please come up?

Lavinia *very slowly makes her way to the stand. She is petrified.*

Gruoch: (*To Lavinia*) Now I know this is going to be difficult for you so take all the time you need, okay?

Lavinia *nods.*

Gruoch: State your name when you're ready.

Slight pause.

Lavinia: It's Lavinia...

Will: Oh, God... You...

Gruoch: You will not address her, Mr Shakespeare, you will only address me!

Lavinia: / It's okay, Gruoch... I'm ready.

Pause.

Will: Lavinia... Please understand me. I had absolutely no clue what I was inflicting on real people; real women... I was just an author! I wrote plays, I wrote them to escape my own reality, not to destroy yours... But I created you and I should have protected you... I let you all down, I'm sorry.

Pause.

Lavinia: You can't even begin to comprehend how inadequate that is.

Will: I don't know what else I can say...

Lavinia: (*Battling with anxiety*) Then don't say anything at all! It is *my* turn to speak! You have silenced me long enough as it is, so now you will stand and you will listen to everything I have to say while I still have the nerve!

Will *all of a sudden looks older than his years whilst also adopting the rueful pout of a scolded child. Lavinia takes strength from this.*

Lavinia: It's one of those things you think will never happen to you... No matter how many dreadful stories you hear about the depraved monsters that hunt down young girls and steal their chastity, you never dream of being unlucky enough to become the next victim...

Up until that day, I always felt so well protected... I had an army of brothers keeping their eyes on me and a father who was the most revered and powerful man in all of Rome. I was everything to my father... His one precious daughter... The best of all he'd ever accomplished in his life. But you cursed my father with a fatal flaw, Mr Shakespeare... He never took kindly to opposition; he did not like to be challenged or threatened... But still, you sent him Tamora. In seeking retribution for the sons she killed, he killed one of hers in return. An eye for an eye, you might say... But Tamora was not one for kissing and making up. She saw how my father treasured me and she knew that the only way to satiate her rage towards him would be to ruin me beyond repair. That is where *they* came in...

I must commend you on your villains; they really are second to none, and none so more evil, more perverted than Chiron and Demetrius: the instruments of your assault. Where in Hell did you dream them up from, hmm? They make Iago look celestial!

Was it not enough for you just to take Bassianus away from me? Was that not severe enough for you? Was cutting out my tongue and severing my hands too kind? Rape is far more dramatic, after all. That'll get more bums on seats – nothing like the violation of a young woman to brighten up a wet Wednesday

in the stalls (!) How did it feel to write that? It can't have appalled you too much otherwise why write it!? Did you enjoy it!? Did it make you hard!? No – please, Mr Shakespeare, I would love to know, tell me how it made you feel!

Will: Stop it, please, no more! I can't – can't hear any more /

Lavinia: / Shall I tell you how it made me feel, Mr Shakespeare!?

Will: No, please! I can imagine /

Lavinia: / Oh even with a dazzling mind like yours, I very much doubt you can even begin to imagine how it felt! You exposed me to the most revolting injustice a man can ever do a woman... Laying your hands on her without her permission... And with such inconceivable violence... You know a mouth can still scream even when it has no tongue!? And tears can still fall when the hands that once wiped them away are gone... They fall even heavier for it... Do you have any idea of the cost of what you did? I think you're starting to *think* you know... But you will never *really* know... You robbed me of all that made me my father's treasure... The crime you committed against me was so destructive that even the one that loved me most in this world could not bear the sight of me. I know what you're thinking... You think you redeemed my defilement by allowing me to be an accessory to my destroyers' murders, don't you? Oh, I'll admit that there was something deliciously satisfying, watching their lives leak out of them as I caught their sins between my stumps... But death cannot undo what has already been done, Mr Shakespeare. My father, naturally, shared your belief that death brings with it a restoration, a reconciliation... That's why I let him kill me. I wasn't going to add to his torment by letting him think my honour was lost forever...

You know, even without the rape, the mutilation and the murder you designed so specifically for me, Mr Shakespeare, your treatment of me was despicable. You objectified me, oppressed me... You silenced me long before you cut out my tongue. (*To Gruoch*) Your Honour, if you needed any further proof of this man's guilt, then look no further than my testimony. Not only is he quite unashamedly a misogynist, a rapist and a murderer, he is a monster of his own making. He is his own undoing. He is the real tragedy.

Long silence. Everyone looks to Will expecting him to speak up in his defence.

Gruoch: Does the defendant have anything to say?

Silence. Will stares off.

Gruoch: Why so silent, Mr Shakespeare?

Nothing.

Gruoch: Well, Lavinia, it seems like you've done the impossible. You've broken the Bard!

The women cheer and clap to mock Will. Lavinia returns to the chairs to join the others.

Desdemona: Not so good off-script, are you!?

Gruoch: Ladies, I believe now would be a good time for the court to adjourn and discuss our verdict. Thank you for your cooperation and patience -

Will: *(Quietly)* Aren't you forgetting something, Your Honour?

Gruoch: *(Rounding on Will, gasping)* He speaks! And what might I be forgetting?

Will: Didn't you want a go?

Gruoch: I'm sorry?

Will: *(Weakly)* Everyone else has testified against me, I'd hate for you to miss out...

Gruoch: *(Challenging)* Haven't you had enough for one day?

Will: I give up. You win.

Gruoch: How exactly do you consider me a winner!?! You made sure I was anything but! You thought you made a strong, powerful woman when you made me; all that naked ambition and relentless spirit... And for a while, I *was* riding a wave of success and I actually allowed myself to think that you'd let me have that... But that was all just a ruse, wasn't it?! A disguise for me to become a symbol for just how much you hated women. Women were the root of all the evil in my story. You demonised us... You poured your talent for manipulation into me and made me unscrupulous, unkind and uncompromising! You hid your crimes behind mine and then, when you got bored of me, you turned my passion into weakness. You did to me as you did to all of us; you killed me off when you thought I was too frail to carry on!

Pause.

Will: You're right.

Gruoch: What?

Will: You're right... Isn't that what you want to hear? You're right. I'm too old to play games... I never wanted any trouble. I never wanted to *cause* trouble. Whatever you accuse me of, I accept it. I'm a terrible person. I'm a misogynist, a defiler, a woman-beater, a killer; I'm whatever you say I am.

Gruoch *laughs a hearty cackle.*

Gruoch: Oh, God... I mean well done, that really was a terrific performance! Did they teach you to act like that in London!? Such eloquent delivery! Such style!

Will: Mock me all you want, but I mean it. Six women can't be wrong, can they? I've clearly hurt you all and done you tremendous hardships, it's only right that I pay the price. I am ready and willing to serve my sentence.

Pause.

Gruoch: What a heap of shit.

Will: Nothing's good enough for you, is it!? *What do you want from me!*? I've apologised, I've accepted my charge, I've put myself entirely at your mercy, but you're still not happy!? What more do you want me to do!?

Gruoch: I want you to show yourself up for what you really are!

Will: I've done nothing but be honest with you. I owed you all that much /

Gruoch: Bloody hell, man! Where is your fight!? Where are your balls!?

Will: I will not fight with you, I don't want that /

Gruoch: / I don't give a shit, you owe us so much more than your honesty... (*She changes her tactics*) You know your wife ran off with another man when you left her for London? She told your children that you'd been killed in a pub fight because you were a useless alcoholic...

Will: No /

Gruoch: / You'd barely reached the end of the road before she was inviting the gardener round /

Will: / You're lying /

Gruoch: / You know they had sex in your bed? And not just once either...

Will: Stop it!

Gruoch: I hear he was hung like a giant...

Will: Please...

Gruoch: And made more money in a day than you made in a week!

Will: Enough!

Gruoch: Oh, but there's so much more you don't know! Like when your children starting calling him 'Daddy'...

Will: I SAID *ENOUGH!* It's no wonder you drove yourself mad, you rancid bitch, you just don't know when to stop! God, I thought I was doing something brilliant when I made you! I gave each of you such beautiful words; I gave you love, I gave you *life!* I have given you eternal life, do you understand!? You are immortalised forever in the pages of my plays and on the stages of the world! /

Gruoch: / *NO!* We are cursed to an eternity of dying because of you! /

Will: / It's not like I killed every woman in every play I've ever written!

Gruoch: So why us!? What was it about us that made us so disposable!?

Will: It made you interesting! It gave you dimensions! It made you heroines! God knows that if I hadn't killed you all off then you'd still be complaining about why all the men got juicy deaths and you didn't! I was trying to make it equal!

Gruoch: Misogyny!

Will: Oh, here we go...

Gruoch: How else would you describe it!? What's misogyny if it's not wanting women to die!?

Will: It's tragedy! Everyone dies! Does the fact that I gave you all lovers, and families - chances to be happy – does that not matter at all?

Gruoch: You tore us away from those lovers and families when you killed us!

Will: Oh, you're a real piece of work, aren't you!

Gruoch: You should know!

Desdemona: *RIGHT!* I'm calling time on this! I think it's time the court adjourned.

Gruoch *attempts to compose herself.*

Gruoch: You're right. Absolutely. Yes. Erm... So, members of the court, we have heard several accounts of the extreme treatment we have all experienced at the hands of the accused, William Shakespeare. I urge you to consider all the evidence carefully and base your decision on what you believe to be just. We shall reconvene shortly to deliver the verdict. If someone could please escort the defendant to an empty cell for him to wait, that would be appreciated.

Gruoch exits followed by **Desdemona, Ophelia, Cordelia and Lavinia**. **Juliet** approaches **Will** who is still in the dock, crushed.

Juliet: Come with me.

After a slight pause, Will lifts his head. Juliet goes to exit and he follows her slowly and solemnly.

Blackout.

Act Two, Scene Two

A prison cell. Will sits alone inside it. There should be a long period of silence before Juliet appears in the space outside the cell. Will doesn't notice her at first but starts when she speaks.

Juliet: Mr Shakespeare!?

Will: You shouldn't sneak up on people, you know...

Juliet: The court's reached their verdict. We're ready to pass sentence.

Will doesn't say anything. Juliet goes to sit next to him.

Juliet: For what it's worth, I don't reckon you're as much of a monster as they were all trying to make out back there...

Will: You called me manipulative, conniving and a murderer... I'm afraid your false sentiment's worth very little.

Juliet: So I got swept up in all the action! Those women, Mr Shakespeare, they're my family now. We have to stick together otherwise we have nothing. I had to stand united with them in front of you; I had to play my part. But I really believed you when you said you didn't realise what you were doing...

Pause.

Will: What is wrong with me!? Who am I!? I really thought I was helping you all... I tried to make you magnificent. Your deaths all happened to prove a point; that the world can devour even the most innocent of lives. I worked all my life to apologise for what I did to Lavinia... I made you emblems for women everywhere, for human beings everywhere... I made you *love*, Juliet. Love personified! You encompass love in all its forms; delicious and destructive... Every one of my heroines has part of your remarkable capacity for love in them: Desdemona's heart-breaking loyalty to her husband, Cordelia's unwavering commitment to her father... You are the beating heart of all of them, Juliet.

Pause.

Juliet: Wow... That's a pretty big deal...

Will: You were always my favourite, Juliet... I based you on one of my daughters.

Juliet: You did?

Will: Oh, yes... Yes, she had your courageousness and your rebelliousness... And she could be stroppy too, at times, but that's only because she was passionate!

Juliet *smiles. Slight pause.*

Juliet: You're not so bad, are you...

Will: I don't blame you all for hating me... I did some bad things, not just to you but to the women in my real life... Is it true what Gruoch said? Did Anne really run away with someone else?

Juliet: I'm sorry, Mr Shakespeare, I'm afraid I don't know. She really wanted to pick a fight with you though, so my guess is she made it up to provoke you...

Will: I think that's what I'll choose to believe... She's a ferocious lady, that Gruoch.

Juliet: She's *passionate*.

Will *laughs feebly. Pause.*

Juliet: (*Tentatively*) Do you still write plays, Mr Shakespeare?

Will: Sadly, no. Although I think that's probably a blessing after today...

Juliet: Why not?

Will: I can't... Haven't been able to since I died. Turns out writers' block is a curse of the dead as well as the living!

Juliet: Do you miss it?

Will: Like I miss oxygen...

Juliet: I bet it gets awfully noisy in your head sometimes... All those voices telling you what he said, she said, they said, and not being able to write it down.

Will: I don't hear anything anymore, that's the problem. Nothing speaks to me. I haven't written a single word in four hundred years.

Juliet: (*Feeling guilty for what's to come*) That must be hard...

Will: Ah, I'm used to it. Nothing I can do. I had my time... A writer who can't write is not a writer at all. So now I'm just a normal old dead bloke!

Pause.

Juliet: The others will be wondering where I am... I'm sorry. Are you ready to go?

Will: I don't think I need to hear it, to be honest... Pretty sure I have a fairly good idea of what the verdict is. I'll just wait here, you can report back...

Juliet: I think you're being cowardly.

Will: Maybe I am. That's another thing you can charge me with.

Juliet: You know, I once knew a man who said: 'Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never taste of death but once.'

Will: Sounds like a fool, that man.

Juliet: He used to be great...

Will: Used to be...

Juliet opens the cell. She ends up face-to-face with Will, who walks out of the cell sheepishly.

Will: Thank you... for understanding.

Juliet nods and smiles. She holds out her hand to Will. He takes it and they walk offstage together.

Blackout.

Act Two, Scene Three

The canteen for the final time. It is still set out like a courtroom. Gruoch, Desdemona, Lavinia, Cordelia and Ophelia are preset. Juliet and Will enter and walk to the dock.

Gruoch: Ah, Mr Shakespeare, glad you could join us.

Will says nothing.

Gruoch: How did you find your cell?

Will: Fine... Thank you.

Gruoch: Good. I presume Juliet has informed you that a verdict has been reached?

Will: Yes, she has.

Gruoch: Would you like to hear what we've decided?

Will: I think I already know...

Gruoch: Well where would the fun be if we didn't tell you anyway!? Members of the court, could one of you please stand?

Lavinia stands.

Gruoch: Lavinia, it is my understanding that the court has decided on a verdict?

Lavinia: That's correct, Your Honour.

Gruoch: And was this decision unanimous?

Lavinia: It was, Your Honour.

Gruoch: Excellent. So – does the court find the defendant guilty or not guilty of the charges he stands accused of?

Pause. Lavinia looks to Will and then to the other women.

Lavinia: Guilty.

The women smile.

Will: Can't say I'm shocked.

Gruoch: Justice is done!

Will: Can I go now? Have you had your fill?

Gruoch: But no, Mr Shakespeare, we haven't told you the most important part yet...

Will: And what might that be?

Gruoch: We have to pass sentence, Mr Shakespeare. You don't just get to waddle on back to Heaven and forget this ever happened...

Will: Of course not...

Gruoch: So, ladies, what do we think is a fitting punishment for this man? This manipulative, misogynist, murdering man...

Cordelia: (*Playfully*) Oh, don't be cruel, Gruoch, put him out of his misery...

Ophelia: No, make him stew a bit longer!

Gruoch: Mr Shakespeare, what do *you* think a fitting punishment would be?

Will: Why are you asking me?

Gruoch: Well, you see the thing is, I'm not entirely convinced that you understand just how much suffering you have caused. I think you need a little further persuading to come round to our way of thinking... What, for you, would be the worst thing in the world?

Will: I need no further persuading, lady. I can't carry on defending myself, not after that...

Gruoch: You're not answering my question...

Will: The worst thing in the world? Probably meeting any more of you...

Gruoch: Yes, I can understand why you'd say that. We are only the beginning...

Will: Let me guess, Cleopatra's hiding in the kitchen?

Desdemona: You'd wish she was after finding out what your sentence really is...

Will: Just tell me, please...

Cordelia: Aw look, now he's begging!

Will: I just don't see the point in dragging this out.

Gruoch: Shall I show him, ladies?

*The women all nod apart from **Juliet** who looks uncomfortable.*

Gruoch: Lavinia, bring them in.

Lavinia exits, re-entering after a short while pulling a trolley laden with books behind her.

Will: So my sentence is to read all of those!?

Gruoch: Look closer, Mr Shakespeare...

Will leaves the dock and goes to scrutinise the books.

Will: They're... They're mine?

Gruoch: That's correct...

Will: But... what do you want me to do with them?

Gruoch doesn't answer. She is enjoying this far too much.

Will: Why are they here? I don't understand – you despise my plays!

Silence.

Will: Is there something I'm missing?

Will looks at the women imploringly, trying to work out what's going on. Juliet does not meet his gaze.

Will: You don't... You don't want... You don't want me to destroy them, do you?

Cordelia: The penny drops!

Will: Really? That's my sentence?

Gruoch: The thing about books, Mr Shakespeare, is that they are very easily destroyed...

Desdemona: You can tear the pages out...

Ophelia: Throw them in a river, make the ink run...

Lavinia: Set fire to them...

Gruoch: Set fire to them!

Pause.

Will: No...

Gruoch: What did you say!?

Will: I can't... Ask anything else of me, but please don't make me do that...

Lavinia walks to **Will** and places a box of matches in his hands.

Lavinia: Burn them.

Will: But...

Gruoch: Burn them.

Will: But they're all I have now.

Gruoch: That's too bad.

Will: I can't burn my life's work!

Desdemona: You have no choice!

Cordelia: Light the match!

Will: (*Looking at Juliet*) You... You knew about this?! You looked into my eyes and watched me mourn the death of my words, but all the while you knew this was going to happen?!

Juliet: I'm sorry...

Desdemona: Don't let him manipulate you, Juliet...

Ophelia: Don't fall for it, he's trying to make you feel guilty!

Pause.

Will: If I do it, what does that mean for you?

Lavinia: We don't have to die anymore, our curse will be lifted.

Will: And what will it mean for me?

Gruoch: You will disappear from history. You'll just be another nameless, faceless boy who dreamt of being more than he was.

Pause.

Gruoch: Destroy them, put right all your wrongs.

Will: But you will disappear from history too!

Gruoch: Precisely.

Desdemona: We want to.

Lavinia: Better to have never lived at all than endure your *tragedy*!

Will: I had to write like that, I had to get plays on!

Ophelia: Why should you profit from our misery!?

Cordelia: Light the match, damn you!

Gruoch: It's over, Will.

Pause. Will looks at all the women, and then at the matches. He takes one out. He strikes it!

Juliet: NO!

Blackout.

End.

Shakespeare in the Dock:

Breaking the Silence of Will's Women in Contemporary Theatre

For many years now, William Shakespeare has been regarded as the greatest playwright in the history of British theatre; a legacy that will never die as long as there are theatres and theatre-lovers in this world. At the age of four-hundred and fifty, he is still making audiences laugh and cry daily, and all over "...the world you can see more Shakespeare than ever before" (Bate, 2014, online). He is not only our greatest playwright; he is also widely deemed to be our greatest humanitarian. His understanding of human emotion is unparalleled and his vast scope of characters teaches us all we need to know about humanity. Why, then, does something about William Shakespeare sit quite uncomfortably with me?

Vanessa Thorpe's article for *The Guardian* newspaper, 'Did Shakespeare sell women short?' sums up my conundrum perfectly. In the article, Thorpe quotes Dame Janet Suzman, who says: 'There is simply no spiritual, intellectual or metaphysical [female] equivalent to Lear, the Richards, the Henrys, nor the twin peaks of Othello and... Iago... No crazed Timons or Tituses, nor anything like the Everest of Hamlet...' (Suzman in Thorpe, 2013, online). The article also states that even the best female roles that Shakespeare created, such as Lady Macbeth, Cleopatra, Rosalind and Viola, have a pitiful number of lines throughout their plays compared with their male counterparts. Not only is the female presence in Shakespeare marginalised by their characters' lack of lines, but also by the treatment their characters endure. This has come to Phyllis Rackin's attention, who has observed that 'these stories have too often emphasized patriarchal power, male misogyny and women's oppression' (Rackin, 2005, p. 2). She goes on to explain that 'modern scholars have often identified [Shakespeare's plays] as sites of women's repression – evidence of women's subordinate place in his own world and an influential means of validating subordination for future generations. Women's roles in

Shakespeare are far more limited than men's... and female power is repeatedly characterized as threatening or even demonic' (Rackin, 2005, p. 48).

Our current theatrical climate is rife with controversy concerning the underrepresentation of women in theatre, both onstage and behind the scenes (Sedghi, 2012, online). Gender inequality has always been a prevalent issue, and even in our modern world, women still face the backlash of society's draconian attitudes towards them. The theatre industry is a microcosm, with Shakespeare's plays bestriding the issue as a prime example of female underrepresentation and oppression in the arts, with only sixteen percent of the nine-hundred and eighty-one characters he created being female (Sedghi, 2012, online).

Hell is Empty and All the Women are Here is my response to this issue. To set it in context, I had begun to notice a shift in the way Shakespeare's plays were being treated by women about a year and a half before I commenced writing. Theatres like the Donmar Warehouse and Manchester's Royal Exchange started to move away from convention, provocatively staging an all-female reinvention of one of Shakespeare's most male-centric plays and casting a woman as Hamlet, Shakespeare's greatest ever male role. I call this movement, in my own words, 'the era of Shakespeare's women'; women transposing these male-driven plays and adapting them to better suit a female agenda. This was my starting point for *Hell is Empty and All the Women are Here*.

Whilst the tradition of translating and borrowing from Shakespeare is not a new development in contemporary theatre, I think that *Hell is Empty...* attacks it differently because it puts audiences in a genuinely tricky situation. It places Shakespeare at the mercy of his own creations and poses some huge questions: was William Shakespeare a misogynist, or was he simply reflecting the world around him? Did he really think through the immense brutality he was exposing his female characters to? Spectators will be fighting against what they know and

love about Shakespeare and be forced into considering that, actually, he might not have been such a great humanitarian after all.

This essay will examine the creative process behind *Hell is Empty...* and explore how I made this piece of work through three key lenses: Strategy, Form and Context. The Strategy section of the essay chronicles how I took *Hell is Empty...* from initial idea to fully-fledged script, particularly focussing on the research I carried out, and the Form part looks at the dramatic techniques present within the text. Finally, the essay's segment on Context positions the play in the field of other plays and playwrights, with new writing and feminist theatre being the primary categories that this play fits into.

Before looking at the Strategy behind *Hell is Empty and All the Women are Here*, let us first briefly synopsis the play. It is set in my interpretation of Purgatory in April 2014, on William Shakespeare's four-hundred and fiftieth birthday, and the four-hundred and thirty-seventh birthday of Lady Macbeth, who I have named Gruoch. Purgatory resembles a modern-day prison and this particular wing is presided over by the prison officer, Hecate. On the morning of Gruoch's birthday, whilst she is having breakfast in the canteen with her comrades, Juliet, Desdemona, Lavinia, Ophelia and Cordelia, she flies into a rage after seeing a news item on the television documenting the celebrations commemorating Shakespeare's birthday. She throws a chair at the television and is escorted from the stage by Hecate. Hecate then confronts Gruoch about her fierce anger towards Shakespeare and asks her what it would take for her to move on, as she cannot keep damaging prison property every time Shakespeare's name is mentioned. Gruoch replies that what it would take is revenge, justice and for William Shakespeare to disappear from history. So Hecate strikes a deal with Gruoch: she will give the women the rest of the day with Shakespeare and they later decide to put him on trial for his treatment of them. If they can prove Shakespeare's guilt and convince him to burn his plays,

then Hecate will lift the curse on the women which means they must suffer the pain of their deaths all over again every time their play is read. If he refuses, the curse will remain.

Strategy

My initial idea was simple: I wanted to create an opportunity for some of Shakespeare's tragic heroines to confront and attack Shakespeare in person for the grisly deaths he designed for them and for how his male characters treated them throughout their short, sad lives. But after reading and researching around the subject of women in Shakespearean tragedy, I realised that the issue was far more complex than I originally thought and that Shakespeare's poor treatment of his women was even worse than I imagined. What had started life as a light-hearted, fairly humorous idea for a play quickly became a very serious subject and I discovered that what I wanted to achieve was far from simple.

The majority of the research I carried out into Elizabethan attitudes towards women painted Shakespeare as a cowardly man, running scared of the strong and powerful women that he was surrounded by, which in turn led to him either demonising, oppressing or abusing the women in his plays. Rackin conveys in greater detail the extent of this fear of women, which was apparently characteristic of the Elizabethan era. She quotes that '...the period was fraught with anxiety about rebellious women...' (Newman in Rackin, 2005, p. 10) and 'an obsessive energy was invested in exerting control over the unruly woman – the woman who was exercising either her sexuality or her tongue under her own control rather than under the rule of a man' (Boose in Rackin, 2005, p. 10). Shakespeare's alleged fear of the 'unruly woman' has been picked up on by several other scholars. They 'claim that the transgressions of gender and duplicity these women ostensibly perform and the reactions of the male characters against them serve as evidence for Shakespeare's own misogyny, for his own anxieties about female generation and power, which he works out by eliminating the women who threaten masculine identity and

sovereignty' (Alfar, 2003, p. 16). From this, I understood that Shakespeare exerted control over his tragic women through violence, killing off his heroines either when their chastity or fidelity became jeopardised, or when they became incapable of restraining their minds or their mouths. Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*, for example, allows herself to be murdered by her father when she has her chastity stolen by her rapists, and Ophelia and Lady Macbeth are both left to perish when their mental states decline.

Robert Brustein makes an interesting point in that Shakespeare does not reserve his most misogynistic ravings for his more 'lustful' creatures' (Brustein, 2009, p. 20) such as Gertrude, Cressida and Tamora. They are directed at the likes of Desdemona and Ophelia, and 'the accusations against [these] particular women, however mistaken, almost always become attacks on the entire sex' (Brustein, 2009, p. 20). From *Hamlet* through to his very last plays, 'there is hardly a single play that does not contain some expression of animus against women' (Brustein, 2009, p. 18).

Placing the question of Shakespeare's misogyny at the heart of *Hell is Empty and All the Women are Here* required meticulous planning. I chose the tragic heroines that would later become my characters very carefully, ensuring that each one had substantial rope with which to hang Shakespeare. Initially, Lavinia was not a candidate for one of my characters. I had not read *Titus Andronicus* and was not familiar with her story. Yet after reading the play, her ordeal touched me so profoundly that I came to the realisation that she would have to be my game-changing character. The cases my other characters had against Shakespeare were each damning in their own way, but I knew that if any testimony was going to break my Shakespeare character's spirit, it would be Lavinia's.

In Shakespeare's defence, it seems he was doing a lot more for women than some of his contemporaries were at the time. Judith Cook mentions Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson in particular, claiming that they 'did not serve women too well' (Cook, 1990, p. 9) and neither

did the likes of Webster, Fletcher and Middleton. Shakespeare certainly represented more women in his plays than any other writer of his time, but whether we can thank him for that or not is another matter entirely when we consider that the portrayals of those women were not exactly reflective of the real women in Shakespeare's society. If you were to use his plays as a marker, you would be under the impression that the women of Shakespeare's day suffered under a tyrannical regime of patriarchal power and oppression. However, this was not quite the case. Women were entitled to go out and forge careers for themselves and also 'possessed considerable economic power' (Rackin, 2005, p. 21). Furthermore, 'at the time of Shakespeare's birth in 1564, women – first Queen Mary and then Queen Elizabeth – had already occupied the British throne for eleven years, and Elizabeth was to reign for most of his adult life' (Rackin, 2005, p. 29). Whilst there were, of course, still numerous inequalities between the men and women of Shakespeare's time, such as women being banned from the stages of the playhouse, it seems that Shakespeare's almost complete subordination of women in his plays failed to account for the fact that he was surrounded by women who had some degree of power. Women also made up a large percentage of patrons within the theatre and the 'economic power they possessed as paying customers in the playhouse meant that none of Shakespeare's plays could have been successful in his time if it failed to please them' (Rackin, 2005, p. 47). In that case, why would Shakespeare not want to reward the generosity of these women by giving them female characters worth watching?

This area of my research gave me significant grounds on which I then started to build the prosecution case against Shakespeare. I took each of my individual female characters and concentrated on one testimony at a time. One thing that crucially had to be achieved with these testimonies was to present the cases as if these women were real and that they had really suffered at the hands of Shakespeare's violent misogyny. When examining the cases, it was clear to see that these women had endured very real struggles and by dissecting Shakespearean

representations of the tragic heroine, I intended to challenge contemporary attitudes towards women with *Hell is Empty...* Again, it is Lavinia's case which strikes a strong chord here.

Having spent four years at university now, I have been well exposed to the prevailing "lad culture" that seems to poison all young women's enjoyment of university life. The misogynistic chanting and games such as "It's Not Rape If..." being just two examples of the disgusting lack of respect young women are tormented with. Also endemic to our current society is the culture of "victim-blaming", which movements like the Everyday Sexism project are fervently trying to shut down (Bates, 2014, online). In an extract from Valerie Wayne's compilation of feminist criticism of Shakespeare, *The Matter of Difference*, Marion Wynne-Davies quotes Judge David Wild who used the following statement in relation to a rape trial in 1986: 'Women who say no do not always mean no. It is a question of how she says it, how she shows it and makes it clear. If she doesn't want it, she only has to keep her legs shut...' (Wild in Wynne-Davies, 1991, p. 129). This was said almost twenty years ago, yet it still has chilling reverberations relative to how victims are treated in contemporary circles of justice. What Judge Wild fails to recognise here, is not only the over-powering physical strength which rapists wield over their victims, but also the gross violation that is committed through an act of rape. As Wynne-Davies explains, 'rape is a crime... used to assert the absolute authority of one being over another... Moreover, as sexual identity in the early modern period was inextricably bound to personal identity, the violation of the body became an invasion and domination of the inner subject, an absolute depersonalising' (Wynne-Davies, 1991, pp. 131-132). Lavinia's rapists, Chiron and Demetrius, then go even further to humiliate her; they cut off her tongue and her hands so that she can never reveal their names. David Mann believes the Elizabethans were prone to blaming women for their own downfalls, as their female characters were often undone by the destructive power of their own beauty (Mann, 2008, p. 179), as is the case with Lavinia. To twist the knife further still, Lavinia's agency means she cannot even kill herself

without the help of a man. Shakespeare empowers her briefly by enabling her to assist in the murders of her rapists but this empowerment ‘rebound[s] in a final assertion of male dominance’ (Wynne-Davies, 1991, p. 136) when Titus kills her.

With drawing attention to the cruel struggles these women faced being at the top of my agenda and in making *Hell is Empty...* a female-orientated response to women’s underrepresentation, I want to avoid the play ever being billed as being *about* Shakespeare. The play *involves* Shakespeare but it is not *his* play in the way that, for example, Edward Bond’s *Bingo* is Shakespeare’s play. The play is about his women moving away from their association with him as people in their own right, and about them finally being offered the opportunity to break their centuries-long silences.

Taking *Hell is Empty and All the Women are Here* from initial idea to full-length play has not been a smooth journey. There were times after each of my supervisions when I felt like I had taken on far too difficult a challenge for someone who was relatively new to playwriting, and during the Playwrights’ Workshop I learned the hard way that a playwright’s place in the rehearsal room is ‘to love and be silent’ (Shakespeare, 2005, p. 911). I believe the play has come a long way since the first draft back in 2013, the progress of which I shall discuss further in this next section.

Form

When I talk about Form in relation to *Hell is Empty and All the Women are Here*, I refer to the shape of the play, and the ingredients which go into the play to help make it a technical success as well as a dramatic success. I cannot go into detail about every technique operating within *Hell is Empty...* so I have chosen to focus on three key technical elements which have developed most significantly in the play from the first draft to the final script: Character, Action and Format.

With *Hell is Empty and All the Women are Here*, I have faced one of my biggest challenges yet where creating character is concerned; the problem being that in the great canon of British theatre, the majority of my characters already belonged to someone else. Feeling like a thief, it took a while for me to make peace with the fact that these women were not Shakespeare's characters anymore; I had to make them mine. I found it very difficult to detach these characters from their original plays because I needed and was relying on a lot of the material from their original plays, i.e. the abuse and maltreatment they had suffered, to map out the psychological scars they carry with them in their afterlife.

Therefore to a certain extent, I almost had to forget that I had encountered Lady Macbeth, Lavinia, Juliet, Cordelia, Desdemona and Ophelia in their previous dramatic contexts and get to know them as *my* characters. I did struggle with this at first, particularly when it came to developing the characters of Cordelia, Ophelia and Desdemona. All three are figures of chastity, beauty, virtue and innocence and in my early attempts to modernise them, their individual differences were sliding into one another and I was left with three indiscreet characters. Lavinia also had the tendency to slip into this same bracket, particularly in Act One before she breaks her silence, but it was easier to separate her from the rest because her awakening and liberation in Act Two is so monumental. The playwright Steve Waters reminds us that 'the presentation of character is about individuating voices and actions that separate one figure from another...' (Waters, 2010, p. 100). In order to individuate the voices and actions of Desdemona, Cordelia and Ophelia, I looked deeper into the plays in which they began their lives and researched scholarly interpretations of their characters.

A turning point in Desdemona's characterisation came when I read David Mann's book, *Shakespeare's Women*. He calls Desdemona 'no more than the two-dimensional sacrificial victim... [She] never emerges even briefly as a recognisable human being, but remains a cipher' (Mann, 2008, p. 152). This critique of her angered me because it neglected to account

for the times in *Othello* where she shows evidence of strength and ferocity, like, as Judith Cook points out, ‘after the brothel scene... [when] she pulls herself together for a formal banquet, at which she must entertain men who have seen her publicly struck’ (Cook, 1990, p. 96). There is immense strength of will in this and, furthermore, there is the argument that, if Desdemona is as passive and submissive as her critics suggest, then how did she summon the nerve to ‘defy her family [and] marry a man of another race?’ (Cook, 1990, p. 95). Therefore, with my Desdemona character, I chose to amplify this feisty part of her personality and sharpen her tongue slightly. What I also did with Desdemona was give her the capacity for full-blooded violent hatred. I wanted to give her some of her spirit back after the untimely and brutal murder she was given. But, even in death, she cannot forget what men did to her, and her hatred of Shakespeare in *Hell is Empty...* is more than justified.

As I said previously, I wanted to bring the reality and severity of these women’s experiences to the attention of the audience, and show that even though these women’s stories are hundreds of years old, shadows of them can be seen every day in contemporary society. Desdemona was ultimately a battered woman and a victim of domestic violence; the abuse she tolerated was both emotional and physical. This degree of violence was not uncommon on the Elizabethan stage (Mann, 2008, p. 186) and it certainly was not uncommon in Shakespeare’s plays. It is also not uncommon today, and the story of Desdemona has startling significance to real issues arising in this modern world. Statistics on the *Refuge* website, a charity that gives support to women suffering from domestic abuse, states that one in four women are abused in their lifetime and that one in nine women are severely physically abused each year, with two women dying every week as a result of the abuse they suffer (Author unknown, 2014, online). The reality of these statistics was brought into shocking focus in a recent documentary drama written by Regina Moriarty, *Murdered by My Boyfriend*, which was broadcast by the BBC

earlier this year. It dramatised the true story of ‘Ashley’, a twenty-one year old woman who is beaten to death by her boyfriend four years after entering into a relationship with him.

Separating Cordelia and Ophelia followed suit; a slightly trickier task than individuating Desdemona because they are in fact only very minor characters in their original plays in terms of their amount of stage-time, Cordelia in particular. What I did with Cordelia was play on her reticence, which I turned into a slightly petulant stubbornness. She remains honest, loyal and intelligent in *Hell is Empty...* but I still find the most moving thing about her to be the way in which she is so thoughtlessly killed; she is the archetypal casualty of war, a war that was borne out of one man’s foolish pride.

With Ophelia, I knew I wanted to keep her young and naïve, with a tiny element of her madness still embedded in her psyche. But most importantly, after researching around her character, I wanted her to be more autonomous than her Shakespearean self; I wanted to liberate her and I found this surprisingly easy to do, probably due to the fact that she does not have to answer to any men in my play and she, and only she, is in control of her behaviour. Judith Cook says of Shakespeare’s Ophelia that she ‘seems to have little or no will of her own – docile, frail, used by her father and the Court, she fragments into madness when faced with a frightening series of events... She is Shakespeare’s only timid heroine... She is scared of life itself when things go wrong. Her brain, her soul and her body are all pathetically weak...’ (Cook, 1990, pp. 92-94). I use this in my Ophelia’s case against Shakespeare, stating that Shakespeare sent her mad and killed her because her weakness made her unable to live without men telling her what to do (Roe, 2014, p. 64).

Not only did I have to convince myself that these women were now my characters, I also had to make sure I could convince an audience that they were my characters; still recognisable from Shakespeare’s plays but the main difference being that they are now empowered to answer back. One way I tried to do this was by holding back the identities of the women until

I believed it was safe for them to start using each other's names, as by that point, I had hoped the audience would have already made the distinctions for themselves.

Action is a word and a device which has tormented *Hell is Empty...* throughout the entire creative process. In the first draft of the play, the entire first act consisted of the women simply waiting and wasting time. The act was intended to provide a window into their monotonous afterlives and create an element of calm before the stormy second act. But it became glaringly obvious after a class reading that I fundamentally did not have a play until the second act began. All the first act did was set up a group of characters that did not really do anything. They only seemed to exist in relation to their past lives as Shakespeare's characters, rather than being fresh perspectives of them.

Another obstacle that crippled the earlier drafts of my play was the fact that *Hell is Empty...* sets out a case and it is apparent from the start that the only possible conclusion is that the case will be proved at the end of the play. This also contributed to a lack of action and so I had to make the journey to the case being proven an interesting one. Therefore I embarked on a search for action or, more specifically, a search for a way of getting dramatic action into the play through my characters' activities and making the first act more significant in terms of its content. I found that one of my solutions lay in using a format for Act One. "Formats are social processes, ceremonies and rituals which audiences recognise from the real world" (Edgar, 2009, p. 140), something with a predetermined set of expectations which can be both played up to and disrupted. This idea of a format came to me after I re-read Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*, where the first act takes place at a dinner party. The format I chose for my first act was similar to Churchill's but not exactly the same. I decided on a birthday celebration, which would not be your usual birthday celebration given that my characters are all dead and therefore no longer physically aging, so even from the initial concept, the format was being subverted.

There are two recognisable formats in my play: a birthday celebration and a trial. The birthday celebration, as I have mentioned, was not always a feature of the play and was added during the later drafting process. I think the first act handles the format well given that the characters are not celebrating Gruoch's birthday in a normal situation, and I feel that it has the desired effect in providing more dramatic action and intrigue. Some critics will read the play and say there is still not enough going on in the first act, but I think the most crucial thing about the first act of *Hell is Empty...* is understanding that the female characters are not simply borrowed versions of Shakespeare's tragic heroines; they are more realised and, having been liberated from their original contexts, are intriguing to see in a new light. The best way to learn this about them is through the way they interact, bicker and play with one another. 'Character only emerges through interaction [and] dramatic character is defined by situations', (Waters, 2010, p. 100) so seeing these women interact with one another in their extraordinary situation provides vital orientation and interest for the audience early on in the play.

The format I have struggled more with until my most recent draft is the trial format. The trial was criticised throughout my whole writing process for being processional and despite the trial being an active device to move the plot forward, the action itself was very laboured. I could feel that it was processional as I was writing it, but I just could not see a way round the issue. It became painfully more noticeable when the trial was put on its feet for the Playwrights' Workshop. However, an epiphany came when I made the decision to trace my way back through what influenced my idea for *Hell is Empty...* in the first place, and I recalled a production of a play I had seen called *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, by Stephen Adly Guirgis. I tracked down a copy of the script and read it thoroughly, trying to pick out what techniques the writer was using to avoid procession in his play. The first thing I noticed was that the characters who were giving testimonies were not always delivering them in monologue form, as some of my characters were. The testimonies were peppered with attention-grabbing,

sometimes amusing interruptions and interjections from other characters which helped to add pace to the play. For example, the part where a hard-of-hearing Mother Teresa is called up to the stand provides particular light relief in this darkly comic play:

BAILIFF: Name.

MOTHER TERESA: Did you say something?

BAILIFF: Name?

MOTHER TERESA: What?

BAILIFF: Your name, please, ma'am?

MOTHER TERESA: Oh. Jess.

(She checks her watch): Ten forty-five. Okay?

BAILIFF: Uhh...

EL-FAYOUMY *takes charge*.

EL-FAYOUMY: Mother Teresa: Hello. Over here!

MOTHER TERESA: Who's dat?

EL-FAYOUMY: Hello. It is I, Mother. Remember me?

MOTHER TERESA: Oh, jess. Handsome Boy! Hello.

EL-FAYOUMY: Yes. Hello. How are you?

MOTHER TERESA: Speak louder, boy.

(Adly Guirgis, 2006, p. 23).

I adopted this method for *Hell is Empty...* and allowed for less order in the courtroom, with Will interjecting and heckling more. Something else *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* encouraged me to do was to put some of the trial at the end of the first act, masquerading the interval as a 'comfort break' (Roe, 2014, p. 58) for the attendees of the trial. Making these

changes in turn made the trial format more successful, both in terms of being an active dramatic device and a dynamic situation for the audience to watch unfold.

Context

In this final section of the essay, I ask myself where do I believe *Hell is Empty and All the Women are Here* sits in the theatrical field? Ultimately, the finished play is a sum of many influences and there are a few potential angles from which one can look at and evaluate the success of it as a piece of theatre. I would firstly like to analyse where I think it sits in relation to what is currently happening in the theatre. In the introduction to this essay, there was a term I applied to the recent uprising in British theatre: ‘the era of Shakespeare’s women’. The writing of *Hell is Empty and All the Women are Here* coincided with many ground-breaking theatrical productions that sought to expose Shakespeare for his lack of regard for women. In addition to the Donmar Warehouse’s *Julius Caesar* and the Royal Exchange’s *Hamlet*, there is the current *Roaring Girls* season at the Royal Shakespeare Company, which has ‘[revived] three major female roles from Jacobean drama’ (Thorpe, 2013, online). The RSC also recently staged a gender-bending adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew* for young audiences and their production of *King John* in 2012 put actresses in two of its male roles. The balance of female roles to male roles in the theatre will never reach equilibrium, but more is being done to help put women centre-stage. Recent research has shown just how bad the problem with female underrepresentation is (Sedghi, 2012, online) and I believe the solution lies in more theatres commissioning more new work by female playwrights; they are ‘more likely to write more female friendly plays with more female roles’ (Sedghi, 2012, online) than men. This is not to say that men cannot create great female characters; Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* and *Hedda Gabler* are driven by two of the greatest female roles in theatre history, but the reality is that women are more willing to acknowledge that there is a problem with theatre.

With *Hell is Empty and All the Women are Here*, I have ingratiated myself into the era of Shakespeare's women. Theatre director Maria Aberg says Shakespeare's characters have the ability to 'speak to us more directly when we shift them into new contexts' (Costa, 2012, online), and I think that is part of the success of *Hell is Empty*... It brings out the best of these characters whilst at the same time introducing them to a whole new audience, who will hopefully be able to appreciate that I have modernised these women and pushed them further in an attempt to empower them. I, like Linda Bamber, want to remind my audience 'of the evident misogyny of Shakespeare's treatment of his tragic heroines' (McLuskie in Chedgzoy, 2001, p. 25) and I proudly place my work 'in reaction against... [seemingly] feminist critics [who] interpret Shakespeare as if his work directly supports and develops feminist ideas' (Bamber in McLuskie, 2001, p. 25), because I have found copious and convincing quantities of proof that it does not.

So how do I think my play fits into the field of new writing? What is 'new' about it? I may have taken my inspiration for the play from existing, canonical characters, and the issues I hope to confront with the play are not exactly new, but I am a new playwright intent on creating work that is important and relevant. In displacing Shakespeare's heroines and putting them into a new world, as Aberg suggests, my desire is that I have brought those characters further into the here and now and made their contemporary relevance more apparent.

Something that I think sets the play apart from other new writing is its failure to pander to the "in-yer-face" and dark-comic fascinations that playwrights such as Simon Stephens and Philip Ridley rely so heavily upon in their plays, such as *Punk Rock* and *The Pitchfork Disney* respectively which use violence and shock tactics to win audiences over. I wanted to create something that pushed away from other new work; work which claims to be about contemporary socio-political issues, like Polly Stenham's *Hotel* and Richard Bean's *Great Britain*. I want *Hell is Empty*... to sneak into the audience's consciousness like a silent assassin

and display in a less direct, but equally as striking, way what the problems with today's society are. In this case, those problems are to do with the way it treats women; onstage, backstage and in the wider world.

With *Hell is Empty and All the Women are Here*, I am exercising a distinctly feminist ideology in my work. There is more than an echo of Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* and April de Angelis' *Playhouse Creatures* about my writing; those plays were two of my biggest influences entering into the drafting process for *Hell is Empty*... and I hope I have earned my right to place this play in the same bracket as the likes of them.

To conclude this essay, let us refer back to the title of the essay. *Hell is Empty and All the Women are Here* does indeed put Shakespeare in the dock and break the silence of his long-suffering tragic heroines. I have fully prepared myself for the repercussions that might come from slanderously portraying Shakespeare, literature's great humanitarian, as a potential misogynist. He is the people's playwright and I know my speculation about him being a misogynist will not be looked upon favourably by some. But it is so important to acknowledge the frequency with which his writing included counts of femicide, violence against women and female oppression. Surprisingly, I do enjoy Shakespeare's plays and I would never say he does not deserve the fame he has posthumously gained, because he is the most wonderful writer. Moreover I have to thank him for creating these women in the first place because, otherwise, I would not have a play.

Ultimately, the question of whether Shakespeare was a misogynist or not is a matter of complex debate, and *Hell is Empty and All the Women are Here* is my contribution to this debate. I can, however, say with more conviction than ever after writing this analysis that Shakespeare must have had some issue with powerful, strong, independent women. That is why the women of my play put him in the dock and why they require him to acknowledge his

guilt. It is also why my women require a solution for his misogyny that is so radical and complete as burning all of his plays.

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