

**One-Act Play**  
**FOLIO**  
**Malcolm Elliott**

2 sets with two scene changes  
4 actors: 3 men and one woman

**CAST LIST:**

John Webster  
Ben Jonson  
Queen Elizabeth  
Orsino, Duke of Bracciano

**Synopsis:**

The two playwrights, Webster and Jonson, are admiring the First Folio edition of Shakespeare's works. They talk about the relationship between Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe and tell us something of Marlowe's life after the incident at Deptford in 1593. The action then moves to Whitehall Palace, where Queen Elizabeth has been dancing with Orsino, in whose service, the play assumes, Marlowe must have served during his time in Italy. The play ends with a further short conversation between the two writers on the deaths of Marlowe and Shakespeare.

Approximately 4,000 words: running time about 35 minutes

## Scene 1 INT

The play begins in a room with a table and some books, with two men, Ben Jonson and John Webster, poring over the first folio edition of Shakespeare's works.

WEBSTER Beautiful! A triumph! Ben Jonson you have created a masterpiece!

JONSON Let's not forget our theatrical duo, John Heminge and Henry Condell. Officially, it is their compilation.

WEBSTER But only you could have seen the project through to such a conclusion.

JONSON I hope it will provide some security for to the plays. They might otherwise be lost. Fashions change in the theatre as in life and what pleases the multitude today may be entirely forgotten in a few months. If we do not put plays in print, they may be never survive for posterity.

WEBSTER But the book is a masterpiece itself, so beautifully done.

JONSON Thank you John. 36 plays in all and we may not have included all his works.

WEBSTER The sonnets?

JONSON Ah yes, but they were put together long ago in a separate volume.

WEBSTER And with this book the name of William Shakespeare is immortalised. 'Soul of the Age! The applause! Delight! The wonder of the stage!' And what did you call him? 'Sweet swan of Avon'. But you still have your doubts about his deserving such praise?

JONSON Not just doubts. He deserves more to be remembered as a charlatan, plagiarising the works of another man. I made my own view of Master Shakespeare very clear in an epigram some years ago. He was a writer of little or no merit, taking the credit for other men's works.

WEBSTER Remind me Ben, was it a 'Poet-Ape' you called him?

JONSON And so he was.

(Jonson sifts through papers on his desk to find the epigram)

Here we are:

'Poor poet-ape, that would be thought our chief,

Whose works are e'en the frippery of wit,

From brokage is become so bold a thief,

As we, the robb'd, leave rage, and pity it'.

Master Shakespeare could never have written a line of these incomparable plays.

WEBSTER That's a bit harsh isn't it?

JONSON        The man was a nonentity, a jobbing actor drafted in by the publisher, Richard Field, to put his name to the works that Christopher Marlowe could no longer acknowledge, because the world at large believed him to be dead.

WEBSTER      And why William Shakespeare?

JONSON        Shakespeare and Field were both born in Stratford and knew each other through the theatre. Not bosom pals, but they knew each other well enough and Field trusted Shakespeare to keep his mouth shut.

WEBSTER      So he was there just at the right time, when someone was needed to act as a sort of midwife or foster-parent for the works that Marlowe could no longer publish under his own name.

JONSON        Precisely. Marlowe was officially dead, so it was impossible for his own name to appear. Dead men tell no tales, so Will Shakespeare gets the credit for some of the finest poetry ever written.

WEBSTER      And the longer the deception remains undiscovered, the harder it is to give credit where it is due. You were around then Ben, I was just a boy. Did you have any inkling of the truth?

JONSON        None at all. It was only later that I put two and two together. In the first place, it just did not seem credible that a rustic scribbler with no formal education, could be the author of 'Venus and Adonis', the first thing that appeared under Shakespeare's name. And that was just ten days after Marlowe 'died' at Deptford.

WEBSTER      Why yes, a very learned poem that only a scholar could have written. The fruit of a classical education if ever there was one.

JONSON        Then there was the first of his plays to be published and performed, 'Love's Labour's Lost'. It is about as far from the life experience of Master Shakespeare as it could possibly be. Indeed, neither you nor I could have painted so graphic and detailed a portrait of the court of Henry of Navarre. No one, who had not actually seen those princely popinjays at work in their frivolous and privileged world, could possibly have created such a delightful play.

WEBSTER      So what actually happened and why did Marlowe have to disappear?

JONSON        He was accused of heresy, a crime that, in theory, carried a death sentence and in practice it would probably have had him stretched on the rack.

WEBSTER      As happened later to his friend Thomas Kyd.

JONSON        And others who fell foul of orthodoxy as perceived by Archbishop Whitgift.        It would not have stopped there. Whitgift was determined to destroy Raleigh and Kit Marlowe was one of his friends. Raleigh's entire 'circle of night' was threatened by Marlowe's arrest. Something had to be done. Marlowe was lucky not to have been sent to the Tower straight away.

WEBSTER      Why wasn't he?

JONSON        He was no ordinary poet. He had a string of successful plays to his name: Edward II, Faustus, Tamburlaine, The Jew of Malta, Massacre at Paris and Dido, apart from his earlier works.

WEBSTER      What were they? School pieces?

JONSON        More than that. His first was about the Christian soldier-hero called Skanderbeg and there was a play based on a real-life incident from close to his home: 'Arden of Faversham'; about a woman who poisoned her husband.

WEBSTER      Novel experience that. It's more often the men who dispatch their spouses in jealousy or rage, like Othello, or our good queen's father.

JONSON        Marlowe was not only the greatest living poet and dramatist, he was highly regarded by men like Burghley and Sir Francis Walsingham as a secret agent. They trusted him enough to make him tutor to the heir to the throne. And he was famous enough to have had his portrait painted. Not bad for the son of a cobbler. So he was treated with respect even though arrested.

WEBSTER      So that 's why he was granted bail.

JONSON        Yes. He had to report daily to the Privy Council at Nonsuch palace. That gave his friends **barely** a week to contrive some way of removing him from the scene without making it seem just too convenient.

WEBSTER      I see. Suicide would be seen as an easy way out for his fellow agnostics, in effect a murder disguised to save others, for fear of what he might say if he had been put on the rack.

JONSON        Yes, a simple disappearance would have led Whitgift to suspect he had been removed to protect Raleigh and his circle.

WEBSTER      So it had to be made to appear that he had died a violent death for which no one else would be blamed. Hence the story that he pulled a knife on his friend who was somehow able to wrest the knife from his hand and plunge it into Marlowe's own eye.

JONSON        All highly improbable, since they were friends and the fracas was supposedly about who paid for the beer.

WEBSTER      But so far as the authorities were concerned, he died and was buried at Deptford. The case was examined and the coroner duly recorded his death.

JONSON        True. It was a piece of real-life drama, every effort made to give it credibility, but, in fact, it was an elaborate ploy to remove Marlowe from the scene, so that no one would believe he was still alive.

WEBSTER      To escape justice?

JONSON        To escape the law.

WEBSTER      And was he a heretic?

JONSON        No more than the next man, but that's beside the point. Once branded for heresy, the charge alone would be enough to ruin a man's reputation.

WEBSTER

(standing up from the Folio and moving with Jonson to seats at the front of the stage)

So Kit Marlowe had to be removed from the scene to protect all those around him, not just himself?

JONSON        Quite.

WEBSTER       But he could not have concocted the story of his own death and carried it off by himself.

JONSON        No, indeed. The plan was most certainly devised by his good friend, Thomas Walsingham. As a substantial landowner and cousin of the Queen's former spy master, Francis Walsingham, he was able to pull strings, fix the jury, find a convenient corpse to substitute for Marlowe and so on. All this would have put him grave danger if ever the truth came to light. So Thomas Walsingham was determined never to allow Marlowe to return from the grave.

WEBSTER       And Marlowe?

JONSON        He went off to the continent lived under an assumed name and found employment as a tutor to the sons of Italian gentlemen.

WEBSTER       Which explains why so many of his plays are set in Italy. Two Gentlemen of Verona, the Merchant of Venice, Romeo and Juliet, All's Well that Ends Well, the Winter's Tale and Much Ado.

JONSON        If you think about it, hardly any are set in England except for the history plays. The Merry Wives had to be an exception because the Queen apparently expressed a wish to 'see the fat knight in love'. Incidentally, he found the anecdote of Falstaff being carried out in a laundry basket, in a real-life story that happened in his home town of Canterbury.

WEBSTER       What, one of the local drunkards found buried in dirty washing?

JONSON        Actually it was a local woman, Mistress Ward, being carried in laundry basket to the house of one of the cathedral canons. One of the cathedral clerks had his doubts about the laundry and plunged his dagger into it, whereupon out jumped Clemence Ward.

WEBSTER       Huh! Might have given her more than just a fright.

JONSON        Quite a few of his incidents were based on local happenings in Canterbury and its neighbourhood.

WEBSTER       But many more are culled from Italian life and literature. So we can assume he found compensation in his enforced exile? Material for his dramatic muse and much to admire in Italy.

JONSON        Of course, but he was devastated. He lost all his friends and family in England and his reputation was ruined. The Archbishop employed a scoundrel by the name of Richard Baines to dig up any shred of evidence to tarnish his good name.

WEBSTER       Worse than any physical wound.

JONSON        Added to that, the puritans had a field day, proclaiming his death as divine providence - punishment for his sins. Blasphemy, sodomy and corrupter of youth. No basis for any of it, but it goes down well from the pulpit.

WEBSTER      And he is still remembered as a blasphemer and reprobate. While Will Shakespeare garners universal praise. It must have cut deep with Kit to see such misdirected praise?

JONSON        Not at first, but probably later. I suggested as much in my play 'Everyman Out of His Humour'.

WEBSTER      Was that the character Macilente?

JONSON        Right. The play opens with Macilente bemoaning his fate, comparing it to other men's:

(here Jonson picks up a book from his table and reads)

'Having before observed this man is great,

Mighty and feared; that loved and highly favoured;

A third thought wise and learned; a fourth rich,

And therefore honoured; a fifth rarely featured;

A sixth admired for his nuptial fortunes

When I see these' he says,

'I wish the organs of my sight were cracked.'

WEBSTER      So Macilente is Marlowe and Sogliardo is Shakespeare?

JONSON        That's right. Macilente fumes about him as a 'bragging upstart: 'Why should such a prick-eared hind as this be rich?'

WEBSTER      And then you have a passage in which Sogliardo boasts of his newly acquired coat of arms. Does he not say it cost him thirty pounds? The writer of 'Hamlet' would surely have scorned such blatant social climbing.

JONSON        Undoubtedly. When asked what the crest looks like, Sogliardo replies; 'Marry Sir, it is your boar without a head, rampant'. To which another character replies:

(Jonson reading again)

'I commend the herald's wit. He has deciphered him well: a swine without a head, without brain, wit, anything indeed, ramping to gentility.' And so it goes on. Perhaps I was too cruel and so missed the mark, since few people could believe my jackanape was William Shakespeare.

WEBSTER      But the wording on his crest: 'Not without mustard' is clearly a parody of Shakespeare's 'Not without Right'. So it is clear that your honeyed words in this Folio edition do not reflect your true feeling for the man?

JONSON        Of course not, but it would not have been believed if I had told the truth, nor would it have helped to sell the book. Who knows? some of those responsible for the deception might still have been arraigned for perverting the course of justice. One day perhaps the truth will be told, but not now.

WEBSTER      What became of Marlowe after Deptford?

JONSON        He made his way to Italy and spent some years in the great cities of Milan, Florence, Padua, Venice and Rome of course, but he eventually settled in Bracciano at the court of Duke Orsino.

WEBSTER      Ah yes, he became tutor to the Duke's children and accompanied him on his famous visit to Queen Elizabeth.

JONSON        You depict Orsino as the Duke's young son in your play, 'The White Devil'.

WEBSTER      Why yes, he is the boy, Giovanni. His father was infatuated by a famous beauty, Vitoria Corombona, so much so that he had her husband strangled and his own wife murdered in order to marry Vitoria. It did him little good. He was himself murdered soon after.

JONSON        It must have been devastating for young Giovanni, to lose his mother and father at such an age.

WEBSTER      Why yes. In my play, he asks what it means to be dead and when told that they sleep, he replies: 'Lord, Lord, that I were dead! I have not slept these six nights'.

JONSON        Such a grim beginning to a young life, but he seems to have thrived and enjoyed a happy adolescence in the household of his uncle, the Duke of Tuscany.

WEBSTER      Yes, he was brought up with his cousin Maria de Medici, latterly Queen of France, as wife of Henry of Navarre.

JONSON        And as a young man, he became something of a hero, being wounded at the battle of Lepanto in an attempt to seize the island of Chios from the Turks.

WEBSTER      And he showed courage too, of a different sort, in visiting the Protestant excommunicated Queen of England.

JONSON        Why yes. It had to be kept a close secret. He dared not even tell his wife nor his uncle in advance, so no one knew of his coming to England till the party actually arrived.

WEBSTER      When would that have been?

JONSON        The first official notification to Whitehall was received on Christmas day, but it was not generally known till January 3rd when they set foot on English soil..

WEBSTER      And with Orsino, you believe, travelled Kit Marlowe, disguised as the Duke's servant, carrying a very special present for the Queen.

JONSON        The text of 'Twelfth Night' to be performed in front of their joint-majesties, just three days later, on 6<sup>th</sup> January at Whitehall palace.

WEBSTER      A sheer impossibility unless the play had been composed before that time.

JONSON        Yes, Will Shakespeare would have had just two days to write it from start to finish. A feat beyond even the greatest genius.

WEBSTER      What I would have given to have been there on that first night of 'Twelfth Night'! Am I right in thinking the Russian ambassador, envoy to Boris Gudanov, was also there?

JONSON        Correct. It must have been a big day for the Queen, entertaining the Russian delegation as well as Orsino.

WEBSTER      Something of a contrast! The Russian ambassador, fearing to put a foot wrong and offending his tyrannical master.....

JONSON        ....and Orsino, sophisticated, charming and at ease, winning the heart of Elizabeth with his wit and vivacity.            They say they danced together into the small hours.

WEBSTER      Enough to give the Pope apoplexy! To say nothing of Philip of Spain.

Scene two: in the great hall of Whitehall Palace. Queen Elizabeth and Orsino, Duke of Bracciano in conversation

Q.E.      That was such fun Orsino. I cannot remember when I enjoyed such dancing as we have had tonight.

ORSINO        Your Majesty does me great honour in sharing your English dances.

Q.E.      And I have found such enjoyment in the dances of Italy. We must have more such entertainment tomorrow. But now Orsino you must tell me more about the wedding of your cousin Maria to Henry of Navarre. What did your little cousin Maria make of it all?

ORSINO        I truly believe she would rather have been married in a country church, leaning on a plain man's shoulder, rather than that of a mighty monarch. But she endured it well enough.

Q.E.      We both know the perils of temporal power, do we not? Our mothers were both killed by our respective fathers, leaving us orphans to be raised by others. We also know that great riches do not bring great happiness, and success in this world may disguise a loss of spiritual grace. But tell me more Orsino, I want to hear more about the wedding. I'm told it was the most lavish of spectacles, lasting several days and nights.

ORSINO        Why yes indeed. There were in effect two celebrations: the first was in Florence, where in my uncle spared no expense in spectacular feasts, music and entertainment for the people, but primarily to impress Navarre with his wealth and power.

Q.E.      I'm told there was a play set to music?

ORSINO        Yes, the first of its kind. They call it an opera. It told the story of Euridice and was set to music by Jacopo Peri with a libretto by Ottavio Rinocini. Wonderful singing! quite magical!

Q.E.      And then there were further celebrations at Marseilles, were there not?

ORSINO        There were to be sure, but the journey by sea to Marseilles was out of this world, a demonstration of wealth and magnificence beyond imagining. The galley in which Maria sailed was



completely covered in beaten gold down to the water line. It called to mind the fabled barge of Cleopatra. Then, after the celebrations in Marseilles, I made my departure for England, in total secrecy.

Q.E. And you arrived but three days ago.

ORSINO Indeed your Majesty, on Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> January and today is Twelfth Night, the 6<sup>th</sup> of January.

Q.E. Celebrated to perfection with the play we have just seen.

ORSINO. I wanted to bring a special present to honour you in person. It was my good friend M. Langlois, whom you know as Kit Marlowe, who, at my request, presented me with just such a unique gift for your Majesty's pleasure.

Q.E. And what a delight it has been Orsino. Quite the finest you could have ever devised. A play that mirrors my own court and your life story in such a way that only one familiar with both our situations could possibly have produced it.

ORSINO And though men may pretend otherwise, it has to be the work of our incomparable Kit, M. Langlois, who has been in my household for some years and has observed many things about my life which he introduces in the character of Orsino.

Q.E. Not least, your own name. What else Orsino?

ORSINO Why the play begins with a reference to music: 'If music be the food of love play on.' I am most passionately fond of music. And I had twins like Orsino in the play. I was also wounded in a sea fight with the Turks, like that referred to in the play, and I come to pay homage to a revered and beautiful lady, who is known to refuse all offers of marriage.

Q.E. And my own court is portrayed with wit and perspicuity. My household servants and their peculiarities are clearly identifiable in the plot, especially in the characters of Maria and Malvolio.

ORSINO But what of this Malvolio, surely no one in your court can be so disliked by his fellows?

Q.E. On the contrary, Malvolio is drawn with just such a man in mind. He is a puritan prig, admonishing others for every misdemeanour but himself showing utter disregard for propriety in his own life. He is modelled on my Controller of the Household, Sir William Knollys, and he has a ward named Mary whom he pursues with utter disregard to decency, even offering to marry her once his wife dies. She rebuffs him but he still persists.

ORSINO So, I see, Malvolio stands for I love Mal, or Mary.

Q.E. Just so. And the other servants are well aware of his conduct when he lectures them on lascivious behaviour. So you see, Maria's little joke was well justified.

ORSINO The play is almost an exception to the rule, in that it is set in England. Most of his comedies are fashioned under the sunnier skies of Italy. I fancy he may have been in some degree happier with our sunlit days and warmer nights than if he had stayed in England.

Q.E. You may well be right. But not all his comedies are set in Italy. The Dream is set in Athens is it not?

ORSINO I must beg to differ Your Majesty. I believe the Athens referred to is in fact the name given to the little city of Sabbioneta, not far from Padua. It was created by one man, whose great ambition was to build a city so beautiful that it would attract men of science and the arts from all over Europe. He succeeded in part, so that Sabbioneta became known as 'little Athens'. The long gallery he built to house artefacts from Greece and Rome measures 93 metres in length, and it was here in Sabbioneta that he made the first purpose-built venue for theatrical performances. It was just the sort of setting for our poet in which to enjoy a 'midsummer night's dream.'

But tell me Your majesty, would it not now be possible for Kit to return to England?

Q.E. Possibly, but I fear some of those connected with his disappearance might suffer and he could still be prosecuted for heresy. The church authorities dislike anything that undermines their claim to be sole arbiters of religious truth.

ORSINO And Kit Marlowe rising from the dead would hardly be welcomed as miraculous intervention.

Q.E. In that way my protestant archbishop is as intolerant as your Pope. They do not take kindly to honest doubters. I sometimes think they would have burned me for a witch if I hadn't been their Queen.

ORSINO God be praised that you yourself are the supreme head of the church in England.

Q.E. Why yes, and for that I have to thank my father and my mother Anne, who urged Henry to break with Rome. Now Orsino, you must tell me more about your family and you must come to England again with your lovely wife. There is so much more to my garden of England that you have been able to see.

ORSINO Tomorrow I am to visit Burghley's house in Rutland and then Hampton Court before I return to Italy.

Q.E. Then alas it must be goodbye. But let us dance again before we go to bed. I have not enjoyed myself so much in years. You really must come again.

Scene 3 INT. Library. Jonson and Webster resume their conversation.

JONSON Orsino went back to Italy and never returned. The good Queen died within a year. Probably heart-broken by the treachery of Essex and his rising against her.

WEBSTER And what of Marlowe? Did he risk returning permanently?

JONSON Not immediately, but he certainly came back on a number of occasions, though never broke his cover.

WEBSTER And what of Shakespeare?

JONSON        I think he continued to reap the benefit of Marlowe's genius, until, of course, Kit died. When that was, I can't be certain. He always kept in the shadows, unwilling to court the abuse that would have been his fate if he had openly declared the truth.

WEBSTER      Will Shakespeare returned to Stratford as soon as he learned of Kit's death.

JONSON        Presumably because the goose could no longer supply him with golden eggs. So he went home to his wife, living the life of a country businessman, dealing in land and corn; showing no interest in the theatre.

WEBSTER      And leaving not a single book in his will.

JONSON        And nobody in the world of books or theatre mentioned his death or went to his funeral.

WEBSTER      He would doubtless be flattered to know that Marlowe's plays are now celebrated in this folio volume under his name, as the incomparable bard, William Shakespeare, the Swan of Avon.

JONSON        But you and I know the truth and, one day, perhaps, 'when all the breathers of this world are dead', it will be acknowledged that Christopher Marlowe was the true genius, ...the man who was Shakespeare.

WEBSTER      Amen to that.

JONSON        Amen indeed. Let's drink to it!

END