

Miro Gavran

Shakespeare and Elizabeth

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"Shakespeare and Elizabeth" was first performed on February 28. 1997, by the Italian drama ensemble of the Ivan Zajc Croatian National Theatre in Rijeka with the following cast:

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE:	Bruno Nacinovich
ELIZABETH 1:	Ester Vrancich
COUNT WELLES:	Giulio Marini
JANE:	Rossana Grdedolnik
VALET:	Toni Plesic

Director:	Nino Mangano
Set Design:	Grmana Franceschini
Costume Designe:	Luca Fabri
Music:	Amato Ameti

A drama

The Characters

William Shakespeare, writer, about 30 years old
Elizabeth I, Queen of England, about 55 years old
Count Welles, Privy Counsellor, about 60 years old
Jane, an actress, about 35 years old.

Scene 1

(ELIZABETH Elizabeth's cabinet. Several large pieces of paper with plans on them have been spread out on the table; the queen and her Privy Counsellor, Lord Welles, are looking at them with a deal of attention.)

WELLES: It will be much faster than all the sailing ships that are now sailing the seas and, or so it seems to me, safer as well.

ELIZABETH: I fear that making them will empty the exchequer. Then again, we have no choice but to be the strongest on the seas. What is your advice?

WELLES: Perhaps it would be best, for a start, to build just one, according to this plan. Then sea trials, and decide what to do next.

ELIZABETH: Agreed. Do it.

(The Count gathers the plans up from the table. It would seem that the audience is over. The Count goes towards the exit with his plans, but suddenly stops.)

WELLES: Your Majesty, I would like to ask something - if you have a mind to dedicate another minute to me.

ELIZABETH: Go on; tell me what your problem is.

WELLES: I would not like you to get the wrong idea. I am your counsellor, Your Majesty, and I know very well that it is not my duty to counsel you in

matters about which you do not seek counsel, in things that are not within the scope of affairs of state, of direct advantage to our kingdom or...

ELIZABETH: Count Welles, do not torment me with your rhetoric, tell me plainly that you wish to talk about my intimate affairs. Isn't that it?

WELLES: How did Your Majesty guess?

ELIZABETH: As soon as you start frantically showering majesties upon me and as soon as you adopt that ridiculously official stance, it's quite obvious that it's me you want to talk about, not politics.

WELLES: Well, now, it's quite difficult to distinguish you from politics. It seems to me it's impossible to talk about you, and not talk about English politics at the same time. You are the queen after all, and everything connected with you is at the same time related to the country.

ELIZABETH: Come to the point.

WELLES: I have been too long in politics, and desire too strongly to stay in it to start talking straightforwardly and to the point. Do you understand me?

ELIZABETH: No, I do not understand you.

WELLES: To put it quite simply, I would like to talk about it with you only if you want to talk about it.

ELIZABETH: About what?

WELLES: I am sure you know what about, and I have no intention of bothering you if you are not ready for such a conversation. Are you?

ELIZABETH: You are sneaky.

WELLES: I do try.

ELIZABETH: I would like to talk to you about what it is you think we should talk about. Though, speaking frankly, I still do not know what you mean.

WELLES: But you did say that you want to talk?

ELIZABETH: I did.

WELLES: That is enough for me. That is then your wish, and I could not refuse the wish of my queen, even if I tried.

ELIZABETH: Now it's going to turn out that we are talking because I want to, not you.

WELLES: Of course. I am a man without wants, and have been in your service for twenty years. I am here only because I have no wants of my own, and because I am ready to attend to the wants of my queen. As far as I recall, all those counsellors who thought more of their own wants than of yours did not remain in your service longer than a few months, while I, after all, have remained, to your great joy and mine, for years.

ELIZABETH: You do not let a day go by without reminding me at least once how necessary you are to me, how much better than the other courtiers.

WELLES: And more reliable.

ELIZABETH: And more reliable.

WELLES: All of this is a truth that you and I know well, that we are well satisfied with.

ELIZABETH: Then why do you remind me of it so frequently?

WELLES: For my own safety. For your safety. So that you should not wish to see if there is someone better than me. Then again, I remind you of it all because I would like to speak very frankly with you. With the kind of frankness a subject is wiser not to use when talking with his ruler. I shall tell you what I think we ought to be talking about, although it would be much cleverer for me to say nothing, to pretend I know nothing. But, there, it is my duty to think of you even in those moments when you forget to think of yourself. I am not sure if you follow me?

ELIZABETH: I follow you. You will give me some advice that I don't really want to hear, as severe fathers do with their spoiled daughters.

WELLES: If you do not want to hear, I shall not say a word.

ELIZABETH: I want to.

WELLES: You do?

ELIZABETH: Or rather, I have nothing against it. Only just do not force me once again to command you to upbraid and counsel and scold me.

WELLES: These are all much too severe words for this small concern I feel for you and your troubled heart.

ELIZABETH: Are you sure that my heart is troubled?

WELLES: Troubled, wounded, unsure. And then again, so desirous of new experience, new suffering. And I would like to spare you the disappointment and the sorrow. I would like, in these hard times in which our kingdom finds itself, nobody and nothing to trouble the heart of our most excellent queen. For when the heart is calm, the understanding is calm too.

ELIZABETH: Now you have gone too far. It is not at all as serious as you think

WELLES: I know that it is not so serious now. But I say all this precisely so that it should not one day become as serious as neither of us would wish it to.

ELIZABETH: Don't be afraid. There won't be any problems.

WELLES: Yes there will. I know there will.

ELIZABETH: There won't.

WELLES: There will.

ELIZABETH: Well, then, say everything you have to say. Frankly. Simply. Clearly.

WELLES: Since it is your wish, and your command, I shall be extremely frank. Without wishing to, I have found out that you have granted an audience at seven tomorrow evening to the young writer Shakespeare.

ELIZABETH: You have accidentally found out very well.

WELLES: I really did find out without wishing to, completely unintentionally. These courtier's ears of mine have never been well brought up.

ELIZABETH: Do not be cross with them; we both know that you are proud of their sharpness.

WELLES: I am accustomed to having all audiences and all matters of protocol go through me, via my office. This circumvention of my services was the first reason for my anxiety lest this young writer should trouble your heart.

ELIZABETH: It is to be nothing but an ordinary and conventional conversation between a queen and an artist.

WELLES: Oh, it will not be so ordinary. Considering that you give audiences until six, and yet have commanded him to come at seven. I thought perhaps you would not talk in the audience hall, but in your own chamber.

ELIZABETH: Good thinking.

WELLES: Would you like to hear my opinion of this?

ELIZABETH: No, but tell me all the same.

WELLES: I am of the opinion that all these actors and writers are on the whole riff-raff and should not be let into the court. For us serious people they are dangerous, for they seem harmless, and yet they want fame and power more than any general. They are capable of injuring your heart.

ELIZABETH: You underrate me, count. My heart is strong and, alas, too old to be troubled.

WELLES: One never can tell.

ELIZABETH: Do not forget that I have never loved a single man in all my life.

WELLES: You have one, unless I am much mistaken.

ELIZABETH: We agreed never to mention him. As if he did not exist. Well then, as for me, who has never loved any man at all, there is no danger that now, in my old age, I shall allow any poet or dramatic writer to get into my abandoned heart.

WELLES: A writer could destroy your reputation as a woman who respects herself.

ELIZABETH: Believe me, I shall talk with him only about art. Although, when I first met him after that comedy of his, I did think: it would be agreeable to spend the night with this young man and give him a kick in the bum in the morning.

WELLES: That is what I was afraid of.

ELIZABETH: It was just a passing thought, which I soon gave up. Really, I mean to talk with him about art, and nothing more. And that I am receiving him in my bedchamber and not the audience chamber is not from a desire to get him into bed but from the wish to talk to him alone, and actually to enjoy the conversation.

WELLES: It would be wisest not to receive him. Do not start up any conversations, not about art, or anything else. That is the safest thing.

ELIZABETH: Why so nervous, my dear count? I have occasionally had a bit of fun without losing my self-control.

COUNT: With artists it is different than with ordinary people. With them, all values are turned upside down. They literally live off their feelings and make money on them, and it is not surprising that they should try to make you think feeling is more important than reason. But we who live from reason ought never to believe such nonsense.

ELIZABETH: You really have got worried about me. I do assure you that your concern is completely groundless. I have no physical or psychic designs on Shakespeare whatsoever. Everything will remain at the level of agreeable chitchat about art, you may believe me.

WELLES: I have no other choice.

Scene 2

(Shakespeare and Jane in the theatre, in the props room, in which Shakespeare's company commonly has its reads through.)

JANE: Why were you so keen I should stay on after rehearsal?

SHAKESPEARE: I shall tell you, just a moment.

(Shakespeare goes to the door, opens it, peers out, and then comes back.)

SHAKESPEARE: It's all right. We're alone.

JANE: You're not in any trouble...

SHAKESPEARE: Not at all - I have got the chance of solving all my troubles. I have got a chance to have my life starting afresh, a chance to start really living.

JANE: You haven't found a treasure chest somewhere?

SHAKESPEARE: Better than that.

JANE: There isn't anything better.

SHAKESPEARE: Yes, there is. The dream of my life has come true.

JANE: And what kind of very modest dream did you have as a lad that's come true now?

SHAKESPEARE: Jane, can you keep a secret?

JANE: I'll give you a kick in the bum - what a question. For ten years I have been playing in your company for small change, and you ask me if I can keep a secret.

SHAKESPEARE: All the same, answer me.

JANE: I'll really have to give you a punch on the nose for such a clever question. You've confided to me every time Cupid's dart has hit you in the heart, you've confided to me every time someone else's wife took your fancy. I know what even your confessor does not know about you, and you ask me if I can keep a secret.

SHAKESPEARE: Well, tell me: can you?

JANE: Of course I can.

SHAKESPEARE: You could have said so at once.

JANE: You could have skipped the question. Well, tell me.

SHAKESPEARE: I've been summoned.

JANE: Summoned?

SHAKESPEARE: Yes, summoned.

JANE: Where?

SHAKESPEARE: To the court.

JANE: To the court?

SHAKESPEARE: Yes, the court.

JANE: Why? Do they need courteous valets, or are they short of grooms?

SHAKESPEARE: I have been summoned to a conversation.

JANE: And who are you supposed to converse with at court, if it isn't a secret?

SHAKESPEARE: With the queen.

JANE: With the queen herself?

SHAKESPEARE: Yes, with her.

JANE: What about?

SHAKESPEARE: I don't know. Probably about art. The chamberlain told me the queen had summoned me to an audience at seven tomorrow evening, that she liked my plays and poems, and that no one had to know anything about it or - off with my head.

JANE: Why are you telling me if no one is supposed to know about it?

SHAKESPEARE: I would die if I didn't tell anyone.

JANE: This way, you'll die because you have. You know that we actors can't keep a secret.

SHAKESPEARE: Is that a joke?

JANE: Yes, it is. I find your excitement ridiculous.

SHAKESPEARE: But isn't it marvellous?

JANE: No, it isn't.

SHAKESPEARE: What do you mean?

JANE: Oh.

SHAKESPEARE: The queen's going to give me an audience. I should be happy.

JANE: No, you shouldn't.

SHAKESPEARE: Why not?

JANE: Because you don't know why she's seeing you. And then, I don't much like it that she's seeing you on the quiet, not officially.

SHAKESPEARE: Yes, but it's a big chance for me.

JANE: Chance for what?

SHAKESPEARE: Success! To get into the court!

JANE: They don't like artists at court.

SHAKESPEARE: It's a chance to be someone, to be close to her. Isn't that marvellous?

JANE: No. You know yourself that I worked as her chambermaid for three years...

SHAKESPEARE: And that's why I wanted to talk to you.

JANE: ...and that the happiest day in my life was when I came to your company and became an actress. These last ten years, I haven't for a moment regretted no longer being at court.

SHAKESPEARE: I don't understand you.

JANE: Freedom is more important than anything else, and there's anything but that at the court.

SHAKESPEARE: You can really put paid to a man's happiness.

JANE: Are you happy?

SHAKESPEARE: Of course.

JANE: Then be happy!

SHAKESPEARE: It's impossible with you. Our queen, a woman I have always worshipped, has summoned me to an audience, and you want to spoil my happiness. What a friend you are.

JANE: If you thought I was going to jump for joy with you, you are much mistaken.

SHAKESPEARE: Jane, you have to help me. Only you can. If you want.

JANE: With pleasure. Just tell me how.

SHAKESPEARE: You were her chambermaid. You know her close up, in her soul. You know?

JANE: Well?

SHAKESPEARE: You know her as a woman, and you know how one has to act to win Elizabeth. You know?

JANE: No, I don't.

SHAKESPEARE: I want to win her as a woman.

JANE: You really are peculiar.

SHAKESPEARE: Ever since I first saw her in a procession, as a boy, I have dreamed of being in her arms. I have wanted her as long as I can remember. She is the most exalted woman in the world. Just imagine what a joy it must be to kiss her, hold her - sleep with her. She can't be like other women, Jane, tell me she isn't.

JANE: You're quite beside yourself.

SHAKESPEARE: Why?

JANE: Intelligent people stay away from the court and its plots. It is the most loathsome place in the world. The dirtiest and most dangerous. The court is not for you, and that dangerous queen of ours even less so. Making love with her means gambling with your life.

SHAKESPEARE: If I could just touch her with my hand, you know where, if I could spend just one night with her, I wouldn't mind dying.

JANE: You wouldn't be the first or last to die so he wouldn't talk.

SHAKESPEARE: Just to feel her skin, her breathing, to be at the court, live at the top, where only the chosen few live.

JANE: The chosen few live in prison too.

SHAKESPEARE: You have to help me. You have to tell me how to approach her, how to make her laugh, how to look at her, when to say something witty, and when to be silent. Jane, you have to help me.

JANE: I want to help you to keep your crazy head on your shoulders. And anyway, she's so much older than you that the whole idea is quite repulsive.

SHAKESPEARE: The years can't touch her! She is just as beautiful now as when I first saw her.

JANE: If you get involved in court affairs - that'll be the end of you. If you become the queen's lover - that'll be the end of you. Whatever way you look at it, it's a bleak outlook.

SHAKESPEARE: Do you really believe what you say?

JANE: Of course I do. I am telling you about something I know better than the theatre.

SHAKESPEARE: Why have you never told me about the queen and the court before?

JANE: Because I value my life. And I like it when the actors envy me for having lived in the court. I like no one as much as you, and so you have to promise me not to do anything stupid.

SHAKESPEARE: But surely it is not all as black as you paint it?

JANE: William, please, promise me that when you talk with Elizabeth you'll do your best to be thick, cold, doltish and repulsive.

SHAKESPEARE: But...

JANE: Please, promise me, promise me that you'll pretend to be thick and cold and repulsive in front of her. Only that way will you have a chance of avoiding the court and a courtly fate. Promise.

SHAKESPEARE: Well. I promise. You have really scared me.

JANE: For your own happiness.

SHAKESPEARE: I know Jane. Though I do like her, I shall keep my distance. I got carried away as a child, that's what it was, you are right. Thanks for pouring cold water over my head in time.

JANE: No need for thanks. We are friends after all.

SHAKESPEARE: Yes, the best in the world.

JANE: So they say in the town.

(They both laugh.)

SHAKESPEARE: You know, after all these years spent touring, along muddy provincial roads, one would like to have a bit of that external gloss - the silver spoons and the big candlesticks. But you don't have to worry. She's probably summoned me to talk about the theatre and my poems. That's the beginning and end of it.

Scene 3.

(Elizabeth is alone in her chamber. In front of the mirror, she checks to see that each curl is in the right place. Knocking on the door.)

ELIZABETH: Come in.

(Shakespeare comes in. Bows deeply.)

SHAKESPEARE: Your Majesty, I am deeply honoured that you have deigned to summon me. I am completely at your service. Every wish of yours shall be my command.

ELIZABETH: Lucky for you, I do not have many wishes.

(Silence.)

ELIZABETH: You know why I have summoned you.
SHAKESPEARE: Alas, I do not, Your Majesty.
ELIZABETH: But you can guess.
SHAKESPEARE: Well, I am trying...
ELIZABETH: So, can you guess, or not?
SHAKESPEARE: Alas, I - cannot.
ELIZABETH: Your hesitation before saying you cannot leads me to think that you have nevertheless lit upon something. As if it had occurred to you why I have summoned you here, but a moment later you are no longer certain about it. But you do not strike me as being a very uncertain man. Am I not right?
SHAKESPEARE: I think you are, Your Majesty.
ELIZABETH: And yet you are uncertain at this moment.
SHAKESPEARE: A little.
ELIZABETH: But I want you to be completely natural, at your ease. For us to talk like old acquaintances who are completely equal. Without pomp or courtly affectation. Do you understand what I mean?
SHAKESPEARE: I do, Your Majesty.
ELIZABETH: If you did, then that Your Majesty would no be longer necessary. Try to imagine that I am no longer your queen, and you are not my subject. Are you trying?
SHAKESPEARE: I am.
ELIZABETH: Well? Are you succeeding?
SHAKESPEARE: Not very well.
ELIZABETH: Why?
SHAKESPEARE: In your every movement it is impossible not to see the exalted bearing of a monarch. I find it hard to forget that you are the highest being in this country of ours.
ELIZABETH: To make it easier for you to feel equal, I have received you here, without courtiers, without any ceremony, not in the official audience chamber. So, do you have an inkling of why I have invited you?
SHAKESPEARE: To tell the truth, no.
ELIZABETH: Because of your works, Shakespeare, your poems, your plays. The way you write strikes me as interesting. Though you are very often apt to exaggerate. Don't you occasionally think you exaggerate, as a writer?
SHAKESPEARE: Which works are you thinking of?
ELIZABETH: Henry IV, Richard II, King John.
SHAKESPEARE: I am not to blame for any exaggeration. I stuck to the historical sources.
ELIZABETH: But you added a great deal more.
SHAKESPEARE: Just enough to make the characters seem convincing.
ELIZABETH: Don't you think there is too much killing and dying in your works?
SHAKESPEARE: As much as in life.
ELIZABETH: What is the point of art, then, if it is as cruel as real life?
SHAKESPEARE: For us to be able to comprehend it the easier.
ELIZABETH: Too feeble a reason. Most of all you exaggerate in your amorous plays, in Romeo and Juliet and A Midsummer Night's Dream.
SHAKESPEARE: Why do you think that?
ELIZABETH: Because in your plays people in love are more like children than adults.
SHAKESPEARE: But in reality, are people in love not like children? They see the world with different eyes, they are capricious and imprudent, they are no longer in control of themselves.
ELIZABETH: Yet you exaggerate a great deal when you paint the human spirit. But that is understandable. You are still very young. Particularly for a writer. If you know real love one day, perhaps your plays will be more mature.
SHAKESPEARE: I am open to life, and I will not run from a single experience.
ELIZABETH: That is nice to hear.
(Silence.)
ELIZABETH: Strange how every conversation about art ends with talk of love and feelings.

SHAKESPEARE: That strikes me as being good and natural. If works of art arise from powerful emotions, isn't it the greatest thing when the same works arouse talk about the feelings?

ELIZABETH: Maybe.

(Silence.)

ELIZABETH: William, it is nice talking to you.

SHAKESPEARE: And to you too.

ELIZABETH: I seldom get the chance to chat without having to weigh every word. For us kings and queens, the finest moments are those when we are able not to be what alas we are.

SHAKESPEARE: Why alas?

ELIZABETH: It is so tiring. Being a monarch is such an exhausting business. According to your tragedies, one would have thought you have guessed as much yourself.

(Silence.)

ELIZABETH: I am glad we can talk like this, like friends. Friends of the same rank, without reserve, without reserve. I suggest we go on with it, to the end, and that you ask me, and I you, whatever we like, without any inhibitions, whatever occurs to us. We can talk about things you are even afraid to think of. Let us be frank and liberated.

SHAKESPEARE: You can talk with me about whatever you want. And I can promise you that I shall most frankly speak about any topic you touch on.

ELIZABETH: Really?

SHAKESPEARE: Really.

ELIZABETH: Without holding back?

SHAKESPEARE: Without holding back.

ELIZABETH: Very well, in that case, then tell me: what kind of women do you most like?

SHAKESPEARE: From what point of view?

ELIZABETH: From the point of view of what kind of woman is most attractive to you, what is your ideal woman?

SHAKESPEARE: Oh, that point of view.

ELIZABETH: Yes. And without holding back. Sincerely. As we promised each other.

SHAKESPEARE: It is not so easy.

ELIZABETH: And if you want to know, I shall tell you quite frankly what kind of men I like.

SHAKESPEARE: Really?

ELIZABETH: Really.

SHAKESPEARE: Well, then, tell me.

ELIZABETH: Men of a refined spirit, inclined to art and thought. Men who know how to recognise and appreciate love. Men who have not forgotten that in life there are both love and women, who do not think only of estates and careers. But I asked you first, and you did not reply. What kind of women do you like, what is your ideal?

SHAKESPEARE: I can reply in general - what kind of woman I like, but in front of you I can alas not speak about my ideal of the most exalted woman.

ELIZABETH: Why cannot you speak with me about your ideal? I have been extremely frank with you, it would be nice if you could be with me. And I am so anxious to find out what your ideal woman is that you cannot leave me in this state of unsatisfied curiosity. Tell me.

SHAKESPEARE: I dare not say, because if I said, it could be fatal to me. You might think I am bold and impudent, you might perhaps send me to the scaffold.

ELIZABETH: Oh, you're talking to me as if I were a queen again. Are you forgetting that we are friends, and that you can tell me what you do not dare even to think?

SHAKESPEARE: Even so, I am afraid to tell.

Q: I swear to you that whatever you say, not a hair shall fall from your head, it will remain between the two of us. Well: what is your ideal woman?

(Silence.)

SHAKESPEARE: You are my ideal woman.

Q: Me?

SHAKESPEARE: Yes, you. You promised that not a hair of my head should fall, whatever I said...

Q: Oh, don't be afraid. Speak, say whatever comes into your head. Why me exactly?

SHAKESPEARE: From the day I came to London as a child, and I saw you in a procession, you have been the ideal of the woman that I want and shall never alas attain. In your looks, in your bearing, in every movement, a personality can be seen. And a woman who is not a personality cannot impress a man. All those timid, retiring and fond women can never provoke the desire and admiration that are awakened by the casual movement of your hand. You entered my dreams, and since then there has been no other woman. Everything I have done and written in life, I wrote to come closer to you, to be noticed by you. You are my ideal, the longing that exceeds all my longings, the dream that will never become reality, you are the only point of my life and the reason why everything has lost its meaning. I know that I am presumptuous, and that I have already said too much, and that you will throw me in irons for such impudence - but I had to say what I have said, because had I kept back what I feel for you, I would have suffocated myself with what was unuttered.

(Silence.)

Q: I always did think you men go on too much.

SHAKESPEARE: Forgive me.

Q: It's only nice to hear you when you're handing out compliments and attempting to win a woman.

SHAKESPEARE: I had no intention of...

Q: Yes, you did. And you succeeded.

(Elizabeth comes up to him. They look in each other's eyes. A moment later they put their arms around each other and begin to kiss.)

Scene 4

(A month later in the cabinet of Count Welles. The Count is sitting at his table and studying some papers, Jane standing in front of him.)

WELLES: You haven't been at court for a long time.

JANE: Ten years.

WELLES: Ten? Oh, is it possible that so much time has passed since that day? I always thought you made the wrong decision. For a woman, you had the best job in the world and then, overnight, you decided to go in for that gypsyish, theatrical traipsing around.

JANE: Better to act than work in the court.

WELLES: I can't believe it. You were an excellent chambermaid, you made beds better than a soldier readies his uniform. No one pelted you with overripe tomatoes and rotten eggs.

JANE: They've never pelted me with rotten eggs. I am good at acting.

WELLES: I have to admit, I have seen you in a few plays, and I can't say that you are absolutely bad at the job, but it is not something for serious people. As I understand, you are not paid well, and one day you'll be getting old.

JANE: What are you trying to say?

WELLES: This: I could help you get a job at court again, not as an ordinary chambermaid this time, but as a supervisor.

JANE: And in return I would do the one little service you're about to ask of me.

WELLES: Well done! You are a clever girl. It's clear you spent three years at court.

JANE: Where one good turn deserves another, as you often used to say.

WELLES: Exactly.

JANE: I wonder what you want from me.

WELLES: You'll find out. Quite soon.

JANE: Go on, then.

WELLES: Jane, you're Shakespeare's best girl friend. Aren't you?
JANE: Who his best girl friend is, only Shakespeare knows.
WELLES: That young chap is a very nice man, only imprudent. He is shoving himself in where he doesn't belong, exposing himself to danger, putting his health at risk. Do you know what I am talking about?
JANE: No, I don't.
WELLES: Yes, you do. You just pretend not to. But I can speak outright, this young man is a bond between us. You and I both wish him good health and a long life.
JANE: I do hope so.
WELLES: Can you doubt it?
JANE: Oh, Lord, we all doubt, all believe, that's the way the good Lord made us.
WELLES: Well, then, I know that you know that Shakespeare is having an affair with our dear queen. This ridiculous and frivolous episode has lasted a month already. At the beginning I thought, or rather, hoped, that the queen would have done with him after a week. That is how it has been so far - not a single man has kept her interest more than seven days.
JANE: Except one.
WELLES: Except one, but we don't talk of him.
JANE: Which is to say, not a one.
WELLES: Exactly. And always, our dear queen, after a few days of toying would return to the serious affairs that we have in abundance, and everything would be as if nothing had ever been.
JANE: But now?
WELLES: But now, this whole romance has been going on too long. The queen is neglecting her duties and obligations. She is losing her authority over the courtiers. All sorts of things are being repeated around the Town. In a word: the kingdom is in great danger, however much things might look harmless and delightful at this moment.
JANE: And you have decided to take matters into your own hands.
WELLES: That would be putting it too strongly. I am just an ordinary servant of our great queen, and I would like to return life to its old groove, without any excessive excitement. For politics, you know, it is best when nothing changes, when everything takes its own course, without any surprises. And your friend Shakespeare has introduced so many upsets into the ordinary affairs of court that many of the courtiers have started to wish he might fall ill, or run upon the point of a dagger at night.
JANE: But you do not want that.
WELLES: Of course I don't. I like the world to be kept in order without any blood, with the least possible effort, the maximum effect.
JANE: How can I help you?
WELLES: I know you are Shakespeare's best girl friend, and I know you are just a friend. But you see, men often have that failing of believing in the impossible, because it suits them. There are also men who believe that a woman can be only a friend. They want a woman friend in their life, and so they imagine that it is only friendship. For years they are capable of doing everything to make this friendship stay just friendship, although all those years they have wanted to take this friend to bed. But yet they do not take her to bed, although this friend would happily lie with him. And do you know why they are capable of never asking whether she would like to make love with them?
JANE: Why?
WELLES: They are embarrassed. Embarrassed to talk to their friend as a woman and lose her friendship. It is embarrassing, although they are quite capable of picking up the worst slut from the street, taking her to a tavern, making love with her, and thinking they are in the arms of their best girl friend.
JANE: Why are you telling me all this?
WELLES: Because we have an aim in common. You want to save Shakespeare from the queen's embraces, and I want to save the queen from Shakespeare's. We both know that the relationship is harmful to them. And we also know that a man can be cured of one love only with another.

JANE: So?

WELLES: At the moment, there is no other woman in the world at the moment for your enamoured friend except the queen. No woman to pluck him from her arms, and offer him the pleasure of forbidden fruits, not one, except, except you.

JANE: Except me.

WELLES: Yes, except you, the only girl friend he has never made love to.

JANE: But he is a friend, I have never tried ...

WELLES: I know. But look to your conscience, your heart and your fingers. Recall how many times in the cold night you have played with you fingers, thinking about him.

JANE: You are really lewd.

WELLES: Only because I know people, because I can easily discover their feelings.

JANE: I would venture to say you are nad've.

WELLES: For a politician, that is the greatest of insults. And I know that what I am asking of you does have its own naivety. But Jane, you are my only hope. I haven't thought up anything better, and I feel the queen will not leave Shakespeare until his delight in her dies down. Unluckily, their love is mutual, mutually nourishing itself and bursting into flame. In return, I can offer you service at court, or a hundred guineas. Just decide what you would prefer.

JANE: A hundred guineas for taking my friend to bed?

WELLES: And taking his mind off the queen.

JANE: I am sorry, but for no money would I sleep with a man, especially with my best friend. You see, I like women, I sleep only with women, and men disgust me in this light. I can keep company with them, but I do not like them to touch me. On the whole they are coarse and filthy.

WELLES: You like women?

JANE: Yes.

WELLES: Really?

JANE: Really.

WELLES: Wonderful!

JANE: Why wonderful?

WELLES: My wife likes women too.

JANE: Really?

WELLES: Really.

JANE: So that is why she gave me such a big kiss after the last first night. How can you admit that your wife... every other man would conceal it?

WELLES: I am not a man. I am a politician. Politicians had better not give in to emotional weakness, not even about their own wife.

JANE: Why did you marry then?

WELLES: An unmarried politician is suspect. If I had stayed unmarried, both queen and courtiers might have thought politics was a bit too important to me. I realised it was best to be married to a woman who felt nothing for me and would leave me alone. And it is a good thing I feel nothing for her either. Thus, for me a lesbian with a good dowry was ideal.

JANE: Interesting. I have always admired your rationality.

WELLES: And so believe me that in my, apparently, nad've proposal there is a lot of reason. I like solutions that suit everyone. Reasons that put things in order the way they were before, and that will give happiness to Shakespeare and the queen, and you and me.

JANE: Shakespeare is my best friend, and I...

WELLES: Hold it. I do not ask you to reply at once, to understand at once how good this is for you and me. Go home, sleep in peace a night or two, and if you want a hundred guineas, or a job at court, or happiness for your friend, you know what you have to do. And then you can come and carry on this pleasant conversation. I have always liked talking with lesbians, you have more in your heads than ordinary women.

Scene 5

(In the queen's cabinet. The ELIZABETH is alone, leafing through a book. Enter Count Welles.)

WELLES: You summoned me, Your Majesty.

ELIZABETH: I have called you because I want you to advise me about something that I can't talk to anyone else about.

WELLES: With great pleasure, Your Majesty. In the last two months, while you have been having this affair with Shakespeare, you have not summoned me even once to a business talk. When I received this summons to come to your cabinet, my heart jumped with joy. I thought, ah, at last the queen is coming back to the business of being a monarch as befits her. At last, I will not have to bear the burden of the most weighty decisions upon my shoulders. Once again, as in the good old times, we shall talk for hours about foreign and home affairs, new taxes, new appointments. If I may suggest it, I would like to talk about the latest incident with the French envoy to London, I fear that it did not occur by accident, and I think that we should discuss the new decrees respecting the mercantile marine.

ELIZABETH: Earl Welles, do not harry me with these trifles.

WELLES: These are no trifles, they are...

ELIZABETH: You can do it all yourself without me. And anyway, there is time for them.

WELLES: But...

ELIZABETH: Something terrible has happened.

WELLES: Go on.

ELIZABETH: It is his birthday tomorrow.

WELLES: Sorry?

ELIZABETH: It is his birthday tomorrow, and I found out only a half an hour ago.

WELLES: What has that to do with me?

ELIZABETH: You have to help me. You must help me at once. With your advice.

WELLES: What kind of?

ELIZABETH: His birthday present! What can I give him? My mind is a blank. I can't think of anything suitable. I want a present to let him know I love him, and yet not to make him think I am trying to buy him.

WELLES: How can I help you in this?

ELIZABETH: You have always been able to help me at the hardest of times. And anyway, you are the only person who knows I am having a relationship with Shakespeare.

WELLES: There is someone apart from me who knows about your relationship.

ELIZABETH: Who?

WELLES: London. The whole of London.

ELIZABETH: Oh, do help me, Earl. Tell me, what shall I buy for his birthday?

WELLES: I fear I am the wrong person for this kind of advice.

ELIZABETH: But you are a man.

WELLES: Yes, but for that very reason I have never gone shopping for presents for men.

ELIZABETH: What a pity. But you could try a bit, show a bit of willingness. You could just think a bit, make some kind of suggestion. You behave as if you did not care about my personal happiness.

WELLES: Oh, just get on with your love, while the kingdom sinks deeper and deeper.

ELIZABETH: You speak as if you were against my love.

WELLES: I am against love in general. Love is as harmful to politics as it is to politicians. And as for your favourite, I have already expressed my opinion. He is a desperately poor writer, and his current popularity in the theatre is just a matter of fashion, not of genuine value. It will pass.

ELIZABETH: Don't speak like that.

WELLES: His plays do not respect the basic rules that the ancient classics lived by. Everything in him is so chaotic and disorderly.

ELIZABETH: He is wonderful, and you are jealous.

WELLES: He might be a good lover, but as a writer he does not excite admiration.
ELIZABETH: You have not replied to my question.
WELLES: What question?
ELIZABETH: About what to buy him.
WELLES: You Majesty, forgive me, but I cannot recognise you.
ELIZABETH: Count, you are not doing your job properly any more, you are not advising me the way you once did.
WELLES: Oh, no, I am sorry, I am sorry. Don't look for a new privy counsellor, here are a few suggestions for a birthday present, you just choose. A real gift for a man: a dagger with a silver sheath.
ELIZABETH: Or golden. What else?
WELLES: For people of the mind, a book makes an excellent present.
ELIZABETH: What else?
WELLES: A powerful horse is nice too. If you want him to come faster than he has arrived so far.
ELIZABETH: What else?
WELLES: A jewelled belt.
ELIZABETH: What else?
WELLES: A cottage in the country.
ELIZABETH: What else?
WELLES: A title.
ELIZABETH: What else?
ELIZABETH: A golden candlestick.
ELIZABETH: You know what Welles?
WELLES: What?
ELIZABETH: You have given me some very interesting suggestions.
WELLES: I am happy if that is so, Your Majesty.
ELIZABETH: You really are a good adviser, only when you want to be, and when you are afraid of no longer being an adviser.
WELLES: I am ready to do anything for you.
ELIZABETH: Only just don't talk about art to me any more. I don't think it is one of your strong points.

Scene 6

(Jane in the theare; Shakespeare enters.)

SHAKESPEARE: Jane, you have to help me. You really have to help me.
JANE: What is the matter with you?
SHAKESPEARE: I can't go on like this any more.
JANE: Like what?
SHAKESPEARE: I'll go mad.
JANE: Do people in love suffer as well?
SHAKESPEARE: I cannot stand her any more.
JANE: Uh-huh, how come?
SHAKESPEARE: She is unbearable, she is worse than a nightmare, than the pit of boredom.
JANE: Is that your love?
SHAKESPEARE: Jane, she doesn't let me out of her bedroom for days at a time. She behaves with me like a child with a toy. She thinks I am her property, an animal of hers. A horse she can ride all day long, without asking what he thinks or feels.
JANE: Well, now, a horse, that's what you are, in a way. But it's what you wanted.
SHAKESPEARE: I am a common prisoner, a slave, who lost his liberty in a day.
JANE: You've got yourself to blame. Your dream has come true. You touched her where you wanted. You have slept with the woman you thought would remain forever beyond your reach. And now you're bored with her. To my taste, it is quite banal.

SHAKESPEARE: She is worse than the worst witch, insatiable and selfish. I feel like some stallion at stud, whose vigour she's greedily sucking out, because she's afraid of old age and death.

JANE: You came to the court. To the very top. It was your objective, the ideal of your life.

SHAKESPEARE: My only ideal is freedom. The freedom to go to the tavern when I want, to drink as much as I want. Talk with my friends, read a book, come to a rehearsal, write a poem when I feel like it, nothing else.

JANE: What modest desires.

SHAKESPEARE: She doesn't let me. She doesn't even let me go to rehearsal any more. She tells me to leave the theatre, that she will support me.

JANE: Marvellous.

SHAKESPEARE: It is dreadful. She hardly let me out for two hours. She says: I am sick when you are not near.

JANE: How touching.

SHAKESPEARE: It is terrible. Jane, help me, help me.

JANE: I am sorry, but there is no help for you.

SHAKESPEARE: Tell me what to do.

JANE: Nothing. Wait and do nothing. You are lucky she is old, one day she will die, and you will be free again.

SHAKESPEARE: Jane, you are really cheeky. You are gloating over my sufferings.

JANE: I warned you when there was still time, but you would not listen to me.

SHAKESPEARE: Don't remind me of that, please, don't remind me. I am angry with myself for not having listened to you.

JANE: What has happened to your love for this irresistible queen?

SHAKESPEARE: We cannot love someone who restricts our liberty. We cannot love someone we do not value.

JANE: William, please be careful you do not tell her what you think about her.

SHAKESPEARE: I shan't, Jane, I shan't, don't worry. Although, day by day, it's more and more nerve-racking, I think I could do myself some...

JANE: Don't be so silly. Be patient, and everything will be well again.

SHAKESPEARE: May the lord be of your opinion.

Scene 7

(Elizabeth's chamber in the dark. The sighs of a man and woman making love can be heard. They suddenly become quiet. Gentle music is heard. The lights go on, and on the bed we see Shakespeare and Elizabeth. The music dies down. Shakespeare starts dressing, and soon afterwards, so does Elizabeth.)

ELIZABETH: You were great tonight. Fantastic.

SHAKESPEARE: Yes, darling.

ELIZABETH: But then, you always are. Tell me, was I good tonight?

SHAKESPEARE: Yes, darling, you were.

ELIZABETH: You know, you have changed my life from the ground up. It is as if I never really loved before you. As if I did not know how to live. I did not know what love is, and what is most worthwhile in this short life. I recall our first nights, your first kiss, the first waking with you in bed. I knew even then that nothing in my life would be the same as before. We must never stop loving each other, never, never. Only now do I see how little a life without love is worth. That is why I want you to be with me always, at every moment. You are my happiness, the beginning of a new life for me. And I know that you feel the same for me as I do for you, but then again, I like you to say it: I love you. You know?

SHAKESPEARE: Yes, darling.

ELIZABETH: Well, tell me, then.

SHAKESPEARE: What?

ELIZABETH: I love you.

SHAKESPEARE: You know I do, I don't have to keep repeating it.

ELIZABETH: Never mind, just tell me.

SHAKESPEARE: I love you.

ELIZABETH: There, that's it. You said it nicely. It's nice to hear 'I love you' from your lips, because I know how sincere it is. You know, I am so glad you're devoting so much time to me, that you are with me night and day. I am glad you don't find it hard to leave the theatre and writing for me, I am glad to know that I am your universe and that you seek nothing else except being close to me and my life. Before you came into my life, I didn't know what real life and real happiness were. You are the first person I have revealed my heart too completely, admitted my weaknesses, admitted my love.

SHAKESPEARE: Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH: Don't interrupt me. You can see I am day-dreaming.

SHAKESPEARE: Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH: Tell me.

SHAKESPEARE: I would like to have a serious talk with you.

ELIZABETH: What, again?

SHAKESPEARE: I would like to say something about my feelings, about things we have never talked about, things we ought to talk about. About what is suffocating me, taking my breath away.

ELIZABETH: If someone has done anything bad to you, he'll soon be sorry for it. Just tell me his name.

SHAKESPEARE: It's not that.

ELIZABETH: Never mind what it's about. Just tell me the name of the person who has harmed you, and he'll never again...

SHAKESPEARE: I want to talk about us. About our relationship, or rather, about myself.

ELIZABETH: Don't you think you talk about yourself rather too often?

SHAKESPEARE: No, no, I don't think so.

ELIZABETH: Very well, say what is on your mind.

SHAKESPEARE: Elizabeth, I want the theatre, acting, performances.

ELIZABETH: Fiddlesticks.

SHAKESPEARE: My company has been waiting for three months to get on with the new play. I want the public, the applause, the stage.

ELIZABETH: We have talked about that twice already. There's no need to waste words on it again. This gypsy past of yours does not interest me. I don't hold it against you, but I hope that you will never again bother me with this rubbish.

SHAKESPEARE: I shall.

ELIZABETH: You won't.

SHAKESPEARE: I have to.

ELIZABETH: You don't. I need you, and I won't give you to anyone or anything.

SHAKESPEARE: I have already decided.

ELIZABETH: Decided what?

SHAKESPEARE: I have decided to go back to myself, my own freedom.

ELIZABETH: What are you talking about?

SHAKESPEARE: Tomorrow I am setting off on a tour of the provinces with my company. We shall play an old piece and rehearse a new one on the way.

ELIZABETH: You are joking.

SHAKESPEARE: No, I'm not. It is spring. We shall return to London in the late autumn.

ELIZABETH: And you mean to leave me to go traipsing around the countryside?

SHAKESPEARE: I have to.

ELIZABETH: Why?

SHAKESPEARE: You don't want to understand, and you can't.

ELIZABETH: I shall not allow you to go on a tour.

SHAKESPEARE: I did not ask for your leave.

ELIZABETH: William, what has got into you?

SHAKESPEARE: I want my freedom. I want to do the work I love. That's what's got into me.

ELIZABETH: I forbid you to leave London.

SHAKESPEARE: I shall not obey your prohibition.
ELIZABETH: Are you leaving me? Leaving me as a woman? You don't love me any more?
SHAKESPEARE: You can't put things like that.
ELIZABETH: What do you want, tell me, I shall give you all.
SHAKESPEARE: Freedom.
ELIZABETH: Do I deny you it?
SHAKESPEARE: Yes.
ELIZABETH: Since when?
SHAKESPEARE: Always.
ELIZABETH: You won't go anywhere.
SHAKESPEARE: Yes, I shall.
ELIZABETH: If you go, it means you are leaving me.
SHAKESPEARE: Call it what you will.
ELIZABETH: No one has ever left me. Never.
SHAKESPEARE: There, you will be the richer for an unexpected experience.
(Silence.)

ELIZABETH: You scum. All you artists are the same. Scum. All you writers, you make me sick. You hang around the court like eunuchs round a pretty woman. You want power and authority, you want success and praise. Too small-minded to find satisfaction just in your writing. Poets dreaming of being generals. Actors playing kings yet having the souls of horse-thieves and the mind of a starving ox. Scum. You're just like the rest. I believed, I thought you could love someone apart from yourself, but no, you're just an artist. Scum will always be scum.
SHAKESPEARE: You are insulting me, saying nasty things about me. But in fact you are talking more about yourself than me. Because you are the one who revels in power and possession. You are the one who thinks of a lover as a vase of flowers that is there just to prettify your room. You forget I am a man of flesh and blood and that I cannot spend twenty-four hours a day in this room, and be happy into the bargain. You are constantly on about love, and yet your attitude to me has no connection with love. It is just pleasure in possession. I have had enough. I can't get any air when I am near you, you suffocate me. You only think of yourself, and accuse me of being selfish. This hasn't been love for ages, just a torment.
ELIZABETH: What nasty things you are saying.
SHAKESPEARE: I am telling the truth. I am happy that it is all over at last, and that I shall once again live the way a man should.
ELIZABETH: I forbid you to go on that journey. You are mine, and you shall stay with me as long as I will.
SHAKESPEARE: I have had enough of this jail.
ELIZABETH: If you go, you will regret it.
SHAKESPEARE: I am not afraid of threats. Good-bye.
ELIZABETH: Stand! I order you to stop.
SHAKESPEARE: Farewell.
(Shakespeare leaves the bedchamber, slamming the door behind him. Elizabeth with an angry motion of her hand throws a book from the table onto the floor, screaming loudly like a wounded animal.)

Scene 8

(Count Welles sitting in his cabinet, writing at his desk. The door suddenly opens and Elizabeth comes in. The Count rises and bows.)

WELLES: Your Majesty, what a surprise.
ELIZABETH: County Welles, I have an urgent task for you.
WELLES: Command, Your Majesty.
ELIZABETH: It is a delicate matter. Concerning what you call hastening the will of God.
WELLES: A contract on someone's life, then.
ELIZABETH: Yes. And we have only twenty-four hours to do it in. Perhaps fewer.

WELLES: What is it about, or whom, rather.
ELIZABETH: Shakespeare.
WELLES: Your lover?
ELIZABETH: Don't call the animal that.
WELLES: Sorry, but...
ELIZABETH: He is not my lover at all. He is someone I hate more than I do the king of Spain. Do you follow me?
WELLES: I do.
ELIZABETH: He intends to set out with his company for a tour of the provinces, and I want him to be dead by dawn.
WELLES: Forgive me, Your Majesty, but I would make so bold as to ask whether it would not be better to wait a day until you think this over a little, and then do it in the provinces, if it has to be done. It would be a shame for you to change your mind with him already dead.
ELIZABETH: Change my mind? What is the matter with you, Count, what are you talking about? Execute my command, as rapidly and level-headedly as you may, or I shall send you to the block. Have I made myself clear?
WELLES: You have, Your Majesty. I have a reliable fellow who shall do it tonight. Everything shall be as you desire.
ELIZABETH: That's better, for you and me.

Scene 9

(Jane and Shakespeare in the theatre.)

JANE: And you told her all that?
SHAKESPEARE: Word for word. A stone has fallen from my heart; it is as if I were reborn.
JANE: You are crazy.
SHAKESPEARE: Why?
JANE: You have signed your own death sentence.
SHAKESPEARE: You're exaggerating.
JANE: No, I am not. She will kill you.
SHAKESPEARE: Rubbish, she loves me.
JANE: Never mind, you have wounded her vanity, and she does not forgive that.
SHAKESPEARE: Don't be afraid. Tomorrow we are off on the tour. Rejoice! There are new performances and new experiences in front of us.
JANE: William, I cannot rejoice because I am disturbed as never before. I thought you were a clever man, and it has turned out that you are young and naïve and have understood nothing.
SHAKESPEARE: What do you mean?
JANE: You have forgotten that she is a queen, a selfish, powerful queen. She is the one who has the right to get fed up with you and leave you, not you her. You have got it all wrong. You should have endured it a month or two longer - and she would have sent you packing, and obtained your stupid freedom, but like this, you have wounded her.
SHAKESPEARE: She would never have sent me packing because she loved me more than she has ever loved in her life before.
JANE: Is that what she said to you?
SHAKESPEARE: In those very words.
JANE: She was lying.
SHAKESPEARE: No, she was being sincere. She told me that she had never said 'I love you' to anyone in her life before.
JANE: There is just one thing that might save you.
SHAKESPEARE: What?
JANE: A letter.
SHAKESPEARE: A letter?
JANE: Yes, write her a letter full of tenderness and apologies. A letter in which you can give her back her sense of not having been defeated. Awaken the human being in her, remind her of your love, and perhaps she will spare you.

SHAKESPEARE But how shall I write it, after all that?

JANE: You are a writer after all. Don't expect me to tell you how to write a letter.

(Silence.)

SHAKESPEARE You know, I am happy this story with her is over. Although it was nice at the beginning, very nice indeed. I don't believe she will have me killed, I don't believe it, because it was real love, at the beginning. But all the same, I'll write her a letter. I shall write because I don't like ugly breaks between a man and a woman, I shall write to her because I am ashamed of some of the things I said.

JANE: Write for whatever reason you like, but write it at once, before it is too late.

Scene 10

(The next day, dawn. Count Welles in his cabinet. The queen enters.)

WELLES: Good morning, Your Majesty.

ELIZABETH: Good morning, Welles.

WELLES: Did you sleep well?

ELIZABETH: Badly, very badly.

WELLES: I am sorry.

ELIZABETH: So am I. How did our job go?

WELLES: Which job?

ELIZABETH: You know what job, don't pretend.

WELLES: I don't know what you mean because at this moment I am unfortunately attending to all your jobs.

ELIZABETH: I mean the Shakespeare thing. How did it go?

WELLES: Impeccably. He was killed two hours ago with a dagger, in his flat. Our man was not seen.

ELIZABETH: He is dead, then.

WELLES: He is dead.

ELIZABETH: Perhaps it is best that way.

WELLES: Yes, perhaps.

(A long silence. Elizabeth's face is dark and expressionless, as if she were not pleased it had all ended that way.)

ELIZABETH: What were his last words?

WELLES: There were no last words. He was killed as he slept.

ELIZABETH: He didn't suffer?

WELLES: No. But of what consequence is it?

ELIZABETH: I am glad he did not suffer.

WELLES: I did not know it was important to you.

ELIZABETH: Well, no it isn't. But after all, we were... he was.. I was his...

WELLES: All that is of no further consequence. Better to forget it as soon as possible.

ELIZABETH: You are right, Count, although, it seems we did not have to hurry so much.

WELLES: You are the one who wanted me to be quick and effective. And now, all of a sudden, here you are being sorry and criticising me for a job well done.

ELIZABETH: Not criticising you... though... I have to admit that I am in a way sorry...It is as well that we have done it... we really had to do it... but I am sorry for the haste... we could have let him live a few days longer, and only then...

WELLES: Why: the proverb says: never put off till tomorrow what you can do today.

ELIZABETH: Yes, but still.

WELLES: Oh, and you have a letter here.

ELIZABETH: From whom?

WELLES: From Shakespeare.

ELIZABETH: From him?

WELLES: Yes, he sent it yesterday. The lad handed it in at my cabinet at twilight. You had already retired to your chamber and asked me not to disturb you with anything, so I waited until now.

ELIZABETH: Perhaps you should nevertheless have disturbed me and handed me the letter.

WELLES: I am sorry if I have erred, but I endeavoured to execute your orders and not disturb you.

ELIZABETH: Where is this letter?

WELLES: It is here.

ELIZABETH: Here?

WELLES: Yes, here on the table.

ELIZABETH: Read it to me.

WELLES: Isn't it beside the point?

ELIZABETH: Beside the point or not, I want to hear it.

WELLES: You might be upset by what it says.

ELIZABETH: No, I won't, but I am curious.

WELLES: I thought that nothing connected with Shakespeare was of any interest to you.

ELIZABETH: That's true, but do get on and read the letter.

WELLES: Very well, if that is what you want.
(The Count takes up the letter and begins to read it.)

WELLES: "My darling, my only love. Today is the saddest day of my life. A day of desperation and pain. I have hurt you, with crude words, unworthy of you and your love. Forgive me a thousand times. I am going on this tour because it is God's will that I follow a profession that is stronger than my will, I am going, and I know that I will think of you and your embrace at every step of the way. Every day I shall regret I am not with you. Although I shall not be close to you, my love for you will never be diminished. Forgive me if I hurt you in any way, may God keep you until my return, and blessed be the day when I first kissed you. Your William."
(Elizabeth in shock. Sits down. Starts to weep.)

ELIZABETH: Give me the letter.
(Welles hands her the letter; Elizabeth reads it. She sighs deeply.)

ELIZABETH: He did ... he truly did... love me. Until the very end. My darling William. And I.. I murdered him.... Why, oh why did you do it, Count Welles?

WELLES: Because you ordered me.

ELIZABETH: You should not have obeyed me. You could have known I gave the order in a passion.

WELLES: I simply executed your bidding.

ELIZABETH: You knew how much he meant to me, how much I loved him.

WELLES: Last time, you spoke only the worst of him.

ELIZABETH: That was just one of those little bad patches. You might know so much about love.

WELLES: Does one, in a bad patch, order the murder of a person one loves?

ELIZABETH: You deliberately pretended not to understand because you didn't like Shakespeare. It was your own desire to send him to his death.

WELLES: Have you forgotten what you told me yesterday?

ELIZABETH: You have never cared about my feelings and my heart.

WELLES: I had to execute your command.

ELIZABETH: Don't mention this command to me any more because there was no such command, it was just a moment of anger at Shakespeare.

WELLES: If I had not executed the command, you would have punished me.

ELIZABETH: I shall punish you anyway. You have murdered my William. You have murdered my darling William. You shall go to the scaffold.
(Silence.)

ELIZABETH: You shall be punished for this murder.
(Silence.)

WELLES: Well, that is life at the court for you. You obey the queen - no good, you don't obey - no good. I shall end up on the block and for no reason, none at all. And if I had not obeyed your order, you would have killed me just the same.

ELIZABETH: No, I would not.
WELLES: Are you sure?
ELIZABETH: Certain. I would have rewarded you into the bargain.
WELLES: Ah, that is what I was waiting for. After that, I am not afraid to tell you the truth. Your Majesty, permit me to tell you that I did not carry out your order, and that your writer is still alive.
ELIZABETH: What??
WELLES: I assumed, last night, when I received his letter, I assumed that you would be sorry.
ELIZABETH: Do you mean to say he is alive?
WELLES: Alive and well.
ELIZABETH: Welles, I simply have to kiss you.
(Elizabeth kisses him on the forehead.)
ELIZABETH: Repeat what you have just said.
WELLES: Your writer is alive.
ELIZABETH: You are not joking?
WELLES: No, I was before.
ELIZABETH: Oh, Lord, how happy I am. It was just a little tiff you know, I just got a little bit cross.
WELLES: A little?
ELIZABETH: Oh, don't be petty. Count, you are a real fox, you are a man in whom I can trust. You do not make mistakes, even when you do not carry out my orders.
WELLES: I do know you well, then.
ELIZABETH: Not only do you know me well, you read my letters before me.
WELLES: I think that after this you will not have anything against my going on with the practice.
(Elizabeth picks up William's letter again.)
ELIZABETH: He does write nicely.
WELLES: Yes, he will be a good writer.
ELIZABETH: I am glad that you recognise his literary talent at last.
(Welles embraces Elizabeth tenderly.)
WELLES: Your Majesty, would you like me to send for your writer, or shall we return to our political obligations?
ELIZABETH: Let Shakespeare go his own way. I have had enough of love and falling in love.
WELLES: I am glad to hear it from your lips. Because we politicians have to stay clear of artists. They get into our life, dig up our heart, take away our peace and reason, and run away the moment the human being awakens in us.
ELIZABETH: You would seem to be in the right, Welles. Never again with an artist.
WELLES: And I say: never again love. For us politicians, the highest happiness is tedium. We have to work very hard to be bored. Those emotional excitements, falling in and out of love, are not for us. It is enough that we love ourselves. As it is, other people hate us.
ELIZABETH: Welles, do not be surprised if after these twenty years I fall in love with you. For what you say is precisely what I think.
WELLES: Don't alarm me.
ELIZABETH: No, don't be afraid. And now, to work.

THE END

Translated by Graham McMaster