

Characters:

Narrator (M/F, educated, serious)

Shakespeare (a poet of many passions)

Young Man (slightly vacuous, rather vain)

Dark Lady (sensuous, but rather down-to-earth)

Desperate Poet (desperate, throughout the play, he is trying to enter the stage from any imaginable angle, but is usually chased off by the narrator)

Rival Poet (very sure of himself)

Narrator (*next to a blackboard or flipchart, making a diagram to illustrate what he/she is saying*): Shakespeare's sonnets. Not a stage play, of course, but dramatic enough. Characters: the poet, the young man, the dark lady and the rival poet. (*Pause, indicating the stage*) Sonnets 1 to 17. The so-called procreation sonnets.

Enter Shakespeare and young man walking:

YM: William, I really-

SH: When I do count the clock that tells the time-

YM (*looks at some kind of (pocket?) watch he has somewhere*): I'm sorry that I was late!

SH: (*unperturbed*) And see the brave day sunk in hideous night;
When I behold the violet past prime,
And sable curls, all silvered o'er with white-

YM: William...

SH: Then of thy beauty do I question make,
That thou among the wastes of time must go,
And nothing 'gainst Time's scythe can make defence
Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence.

YM: Um. What?

SH: You should really get married and have children, young fellow.

YM: Oh, I don't know...

SH (*hesitatingly, after a small pause*): You know, sometimes I could compare thee to a summer's day-

DESPERATE POET, HAS BEEN SITTING IN THE AUDIENCE, *hurries onstage*: Shall I compare thee to a baking tray?
Thou art less square and less laminated – (*narrator starts, has not expected this interruption*)

SH: For shame!

(*POET thinks that this is addressed to him and folds up his manuscript rather embarrassedly, narrator looks at him angrily, POET sneaks off*)

SH: Now stand you on the top of happy hours,
And many maiden gardens, yet unset,
With virtuous wish would bear you living flowers...

YM: Sorry?

SH: What I mean is: with your looks and your fortune you can get any lady you want.

YM: But I'm not sure it's a lady I want. (*trying to touch him, Shakespeare backs away*)

SH: My dear boy, you have a responsibility:
From fairest creatures we desire increase,
That thereby beauty's rose might never die,
But as the ripener should by time decease,
His tender heir might bear his memory.

YM: Rose? Ripe? You're very horticultural today. (*Pause*) It's my mother who is paying you to tell me all this nonsense, isn't it?

SH (*admonishing him*): My boy, I must- (*Pause*) Yes. (*Pause*) But honestly, it's such a pity. You could have such pretty children... (*touches his cheek gently, the young man takes his hand*) Oh, forgive me. That's not what I meant.

YM: Oh but, of course you do! Of course... (*dragging Shakespeare offstage with amorous intentions*)

Narrator: William Shakespeare and the young man, to whom his sonnets are apparently dedicated. Or at least of 127 out of 154. For the other 27 –

DARK LADY: (*crosses the stage*) William? William! You won't escape me, you know! Whatever you're up to right now! (*off*)

Narrator: Ah, yes. There goes the inspiration for the rest. The dark lady. Called dark, or even black, both in looks and deeds. Might have been a prostitute.

DL *returns, to the narrator*: Excuse me, but there is no evidence that I even existed. I could be purely fictitious.

Narrator (*startled by her unexpected appearance*): The same goes for the young man. We have no proof that Shakespeare's sonnets were autobiographical...

DL: On the other hand, let's assume they were... (*in character again*) Young man? Did I hear you say *young man*? And *my Will*?

Narrator: Oh, he's not exactly yours. Remember that the man is married.

DL: Yes – to that unfortunate creature up in Stratford... But this is London – She'll never know!

N: Unless she reads her husband's poetry...

DL: I don't think she can read. I mean – I can't.

N: Which is maybe for the better, otherwise you'd know that your lover is dedicating quite enthusiastic lines to the boy with whom he just walked by...

DL *hurrying off*: Oh well, wait till I get you...

Narrator: Fictitious or not, Shakespeare's dark lady seems a rather resolute person. Which cannot really be said for her lover at this very moment...

YM and Shakespeare appear from other side of stage. YM thinks that Shakespeare is going to take some definite action, while SH thinks of something quite different.

SH (*timidly*): Shall I...

YM (*encouraging*): Yes!

SH: Shall I?

YM: Of course!

DESPERATEPOET *hurries on stage*: Shall I-

YM to DESPERATEPOET: NO!! Not now! (*Poet is rather offended and goes off, narrator who had been watching the love-scene quite absorbedly, is rather startled*)

SH: Shall? I?

YM: Yes! Come on!

SH: Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

Narrator: Sonnet 18!

SH (*relieved and with increasing enthusiasm, while young man looks more and more sullen and disappointed*):

Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date-

YM: William. I think we should cut short this date, too. (*marches off*)

SH: *disappointed* What? (*calling after him*) But thy eternal summer shall not fade!
Wait!
(*packs up paper and runs off after young man, blackout*)

Narrator: A bit -

DESPERATE POET *hurries on*: Shall I compare thee to a stack of hay?

Narrator: ...trivial?

POET (*thinks this is addressed to him*): ...riding sleigh? Vitamin K? Bird of prey? Modern ballet?

Narrator to POET: Go away!

DESPERATE POET *shrugs*: Okay, that rhymes too. (*goes off*)

Narrator: Yes, well. (*Pause*) A bit trivial, you think? Shakespeare lovesick? About a boy? Well, of course, the feelings the speaker of the sonnets harboured for the young man may have been purely platonic...

(*Shakespeare and young man come in and sit on bench, far apart*)

N: Or maybe not.

(*Young man sits on Shakespeare's lap*)

N: Scholars in the 19th century even speculated if the sonnets addressed to the boy were not in fact addressed to a young lady –

(*A long-haired wig on a string is lowered on to the young man's head*)

N: But this is highly unlikely.

(*the wig is taken away again*)

N: Anyhow, the young man must have been of a somewhat androgynous beauty.

SH to YM: A woman's face with nature's own hand painted,
Hast thou, the master mistress of my passion;

N: But let's leave the mystery of the young man in the dark for the moment. (*stage goes dark/curtain falls, Young man goes off*) We know next to nothing about the young man, but, when it comes to that, we do not really know much about Shakespeare himself either. Some people like to claim that we don't even know if he existed at all...

(*SH and DL have come onstage in the dark, sounds from dark stage (Shakespeare calling "Yes, I do, yes, yes!") seem to respond to narrator's statement but are actually the result of some quite different action.*)

N: Yes, and there are even rumours about "Shakespeare" being a collective of writers...

Center stage, both man and woman can be heard – Yes! No! Yes! Yes!

N: Er, yes, well. Can we get ON please?

lights go up/curtain rises on Shakespeare and dark lady in a tangle of sheets, as lights are half on, POET, who has heard the narrator calling thinks it is his turn, hurries on (maybe from somewhere above the stage): Shall I compare thee to the milky way?

SH to DL: Get off. Go home!

DESPERATE POET *thinks this was meant for him*: But this time it was not trivial at all! It was universal! *storms off in a huff*

SH and DL *ignore him*

DL: Oh, William. *(tries to drag him back down)*

SH: I've got to work.

DL: Oooh...

SH: The expense of spirit in a waste of shame –

Narrator *(stage whisper)*: 129!

SH: Is lust in action: and till action, lust
Is perjur'd, murderous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;
Enjoy'd no sooner but despised straight;

DL: Do you want to say you despise me? That's not very courteous...

Before, a joy propos'd; behind a dream.

DL: DL: But I'm sure you enjoyed it, too. *(gathers her things together)*

SH: Two loves have I of comfort and despair,
which like to spirits do suggest me still:
The better angel is a man right fair;
The worser spirit is a woman coloured ill.

DL looks questioningly

SH: I can't stand the sight of you any longer. Go away.

DL: *(shrugs)* Got somebody else on your mind, have you? *(he shoots her an accusing glance)*
Okay, I'm off. I'm going to where I'm more welcome. *(goes off)*

SH: Oh, thou my lovely boy....
Lord of my love--,

DL returns to fetch her shawl

SH *is unpleasantly surprised*: You?

DL: Sorry, forgot something. Don't worry, I won't trouble you again too soon.

SH (*alarmed*): New conquest?

DL: Hmm, quite a catch. Nobleman's son. Was a bit shy at first. But so pretty... And so young... (*pats him amiably and goes off*)

Shakespeare is petrified for a moment. Slowly realizing:

To win me soon to hell my female evil
Tempteth my better angel from my side,
And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,
wooing his purity with her foul pride.

Narrator: A love triangle! (*at flipchart?*)

SH Calling after DL.

Take all my loves, my love, yea take them all;
What hast thou then more than thou hadst before?
No love, my love, that thou mayst true love call.
(*then, desperate*) He's gone! He's deserted me! He's betrayed me!

Young man enters.

SH *embraces him*: To have you back finally... You've been away much too long. But I have to talk to you. Your behaviour to me is terrible.

YM: Why? What have I done?

SH: You've been seeing a woman.

YM (*feigning ignorance*): What?

SH: That thou hast her, it is not all my grief,
and yet it may be said I loved her dearly:
That she hath thee is of my wailing chief,
a loss in love that touches me more nearly.

YM: Oh, but it's nothing really. She was so forward and I was... curious. You know that I love you. Can you forgive me? (*embraces him*)

DESPERATE POET *comes on*: Shall I compare thee to my fiancée? Ah, no, I'll probably be in trouble if I do. (*stands there a bit lost, thinking*)

SH (*releases YM from embrace*): No more be grieved at that which thou hast done:
Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud-

DESPERATE POET *feels inspired*: Shall I compare thee to a piece of clay?
Though art so much more animated! (*narrator leads him off exasperatedly*)

YM: So will you forgive me?

SH: I.... um. I will.

YM: (*relieved, playfully*) Yes, right. You Will and I'm Henry, that's right. (*drags him off*)

Narrator (*returns just in time*): The young man's name might indeed have been Henry.

DL *coming on from behind, startling narrator*: Or it might not!

N: Yes, you're right. There are 2 candidates who are likely to have been Shakespeare's young man. One is the 3rd Earl of Southampton, Henry (*writes on flipchart*: "Wriothesley"), which, in Elizabethan times, would probably have been pronounced "rosely"-

YM *enters with rose between his teeth, mumbling*: William...

SH *enters from opposite side*: My beauty! My rose – ly. (*takes rose from young man. both smile, shrug and go off.*)

N: The other one is William Herbert, 4th Earl of Pembroke.

Sh and YM enter again from opposite sides

YM (*enthusiastically*): William!

SH(*enthusiastically*): Herbert!

YM (*a bit irritated*): No, that's my last name.

N: Once again please.

SH and YM turn to walk on again.

YM (*enthusiastically*): William!

SH(*enthusiastically*): William!

YM: But it sounds silly, if we both have the same Christian name...

N: Okay. Maybe we should settle for Henry at the moment. (*SH and YM go off*) Anyway, both candidates have the same initials - H.W. – Henry Wriothesley – or W.H. respectively, that would be William Herbert.

DL: But the sonnets are dedicated to a person whose initials were W.H., so Henry is not the hottest candidate I would say...

Narrator: I thought you couldn't read? Anyway, depending on what date we assume for the creation of the sonnets, one or the other candidate is more likely. In the secondary literature on the subject, there's an excellent study by –

DL yawns and sits down, as SH hurries on from different sides of the stage, advancing towards DL, the following scene is a chase, SH pursuing and reciting, DL always slipping away just before he catches her.

SH:

For nothing hold me, so it please thee hold
That nothing me, a something sweet to thee:
Make but my name thy love, and love that still,
And then thou lov'st me for my name is 'Will.'
(catches her; with dramatic emphasis and a little out of breath)

DH: Ah yes. Very nice. But maybe you could put it a bit simpler?

SH: I think I can. *(drags her offstage or collapsing somewhere on stage and pulling sheets over himself and her.)*

Narrator: 135. *(Pause)* Ahem. Maybe we could have a bit less sex and more literature? More art? *(SH and DL leave)*

DESPERATE POET *approaches stage cautiously. Is convinced he has the solution now but is a bit timid:* Shall I compare thee... to an old cliché?

SH *comes on, with papers in hand:* No! That's exactly *not* what poetry is all about! Be innovative! Break with old clichés! *(poet nods, goes off, deep in thought)* Okay. Now for my sonnets. I think I should make a to-do-list...

(he starts to write, as time passes, his topics could be illustrated by shadow-play, dumb-show, puppets or similar in the background)

- I am uncertain of your love, dear boy (48)
- you are so beautiful (53)
- I give you immortality through verse (55)
- Time is a destroyer (60)
- poetry outlasts time (did I have that already?) (63)
- time is really a destroyer (64)
- poetry wins over time Again? (65)
- oh God, I don't have any new ideas... (76)

SH *sits there for a moment, desperate.*

DESPERATE POET *sneaks on:* But I do. *(Shakespeare gets up, frustrated, leaves)*

DESPERATE POET: *(clears his throat)* Shall I compare thee to a fish fillet!? *(rhythm like: thou art more lovely...)*

Bass salmon catfish, carp pike haddock sardine
eel, mackerel shark cod herring sole soufflé
stickleback tuna trout flounder-tureen- *(Narrator tries to subdue him and shoves him offstage)*

Shakespeare enters with papers

SH: This is unbelievable. This is outrageous! *(POET pouting: Sorry. Slinks off)* But of course there's nothing I can do.

Narrator: Enter the "rival poet". *Rival poet enters, freezes.* Sometimes rumoured to be George Chapman. Or Christopher Marlowe. But whoever he was, he was probably a nuisance.

RIVAL POET (*unfreezes, pats Shakespeare on the shoulder*): Will, old boy! Good to see you, how're you doing?

SH (*sourly*): Fine, fine. And you?

RIVAL POET: Oh great, found a wonderful new patron. Young, rich, handsome, in short, easy money for easy praise. And you, written anything great lately?

SH: Yes, I... Um. There's that...Um. No.

RIVAL POET: Ah, writer's block, hm? Maybe you should go on holiday, get away from London for some time... Anyway, see ya' (*off*)

SH: Go on holiday? And leave my precious boy entirely to you? Never. But I must start writing again...

Was it the proud full sail of his great verse,
Bound for the prize of all too precious you,
That did my ripe thoughts in my brain inhearse,
Making their tomb the womb wherein they grew?
I mean – am I maybe suffering from feelings of inferiority and am I therefore cut off from my creativity?

I think good thoughts, whilst others write good words...

RIVAL POET (*enters with newspaper, grinning*): Hey! Have you read that? Now old Will is in for it! And the young lord Henry involved too! What a scandal... That should give Mr. Shakespeare some pain! And not only him... (*off*)

DESPERATE POET: (*with pained expression, holding his cheek*) Shall I compare thee to my tooth decay?

No, I'd better see my dentist about it. (*off, still holding cheek*)

YM *enters again*

SH: O thou my lovely boy, who in thy power doest hold Time's fickle glass –

YM: William. I've got news. I'm getting married. We won't be seeing each other that much in future, I'm afraid. And please, stop writing those poems about me, they might get me into trouble.

SH: Trouble? You? Haven't I risked trouble for you often enough? My exposure? My shame? How ungrateful. In a few centuries time *your name* will be forgotten but you will live on in *my verse*.

YM: Maybe we could see each other secretly... But I've got to be careful – I mean, me and a much older man... you never know how people talk. But I'll think of something and let you know. (*off*)

SH: Oh my boy... How am going to go on without you? Wait a minute... Did he just call me old?

Dark lady enters.

DL: William.

SH: Oh. My dark lady. (*Pause, now much friendlier than in their first scene*)
In the old age black was not counted fair –
But now is black beauty's successive heir-

DL: Right. William-

SH: My mistress eye's are nothing like the sun –

Narrator: Sonnet 130, a parody of Petrarchan love poetry!

DL *annoyed about narrator*: Can't anybody get rid of this person?

N: You want to be rid of me! But I'm explaining you to the people! Well, if you think you don't need explaining... The sonnet cycle is almost over anyway. (*off*)

DL: There are still some 24 sonnets left, mind you! It's totally unfair that the silly boy gets so many and I so few.

SH: Oh my love... My love, I must ask you something.

DL: What?

SH: Am I old?

DL: You? Oh, no, certainly not.

SH: Right. (*Pause*) How many other lovers do you have beside me?

DL: None! (*aside:*) I mean, I'm not counting that silly boy... (*to him*) No one else but you, it's true, I swear!

SH *to the audience or himself*: When my love swears that she is made of truth
I do believe her, though I know she lies,
That she may think me some untutored youth,
unlearned in the world's false subtleties.

DL: But if you don't please me better soon, I might take another lover...

SH: No! Don't leave me.
For if I should despair, I should grow mad
And in my madness might speak ill of thee.

DL: You wouldn't be the only one. I'm rather used to it... Goodbye for now. There's a certain young man I ought to see. (*off*)

SH: Past cure I am, now reason is past care,

For I have sworn thee fair and thought thee bright,
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.
(sits there gloomily)

DESPERATE POET *sneaks up, with a bundle or box in hand, addressing bundle/box, as nobody disturbs him this time he finishes his poem*
Shall I compare thee to a cold buffet?
Thou art more salty and more durable.
Rough eaters gobble up sandwich and canapé
oh, people's gluttony is so incurable.

Sometimes too warm the beer they serve,
and often much too cold the wine,
and every waiter gets on your nerve
by chance or by malicious design.

But here in private I've thee all for me,
and none but me will eat thee up,
slice by slice will I devour thee
with some cold beer from a plastic cup.

So long art thou but shorter thou will be,
when I've finished with thee, dear salami.

(unpacks salami, cuts a slice of it, starts to eat, notices SH, after a short hesitation he offers him the salami, SH accepts, as they eat, DL enters softly, looking for SH)

DL: Hey! You're quick in finding comfort, are you? *(approaches him)* You know what – I've thought it over. Maybe I'll keep you after all. *(sits down and starts to feed him pieces of salami)*

YM *enters, looking for SH, startled on seeing him in such company:* William! William, I really- SH and DL *pull him down towards them.*

DESPERATE POET: Shall I...? *(gesturing if he should go and leave them alone. As the others are too busy to notice him:)* Yes, I think I shall. *(goes off)*

blackout