



EXFOLIATION

*Dramatic Monologue Performance Sonnets
based on The First Folio
of Shakespeare*

EXFOLIATION

Christopher Whitby
christopherwhitby1@outlook.com

This is now the completed project to write a fully performable dramatic monologue sonnet for a character in each play in Shakespeare's First Folio. The order is that of the First Folio, with Pericles tacked on the end.

Plot summaries are brief. The aim is to give the necessary context to each sonnet and not much more.

Except for *Peter Quince*, *Viola* and *Osric*, which are the first three I wrote – under different titles – before the idea of the larger project was formulated and which exist in a privately printed book of 2011 (100 copies), the sonnets remain unpublished in print. However the dramatic qualities of some have been tested in performance, interspersed with live music, in two rural village halls and at The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford (to typical Festival numbers in 2013). As of 30 December 2023 all 37 now exist as video performances on You Tube at www.chriswhitby.org.uk/shakespeare (also findable by searching with these terms together: *dragonflypg youtube playlist shakespeare*).

An appendix gives a summary of the approaches made by an independent producer to commissioners at Channel 4, BBC Radio 4 and Radio 3 and the outcomes. As one of the proposals required more sonnets for a few plays, the extras I completed are also to be found there.

Prior to making this document available online I circulated it only to people who I hoped might be interested or possibly find a way to use them. Most recipients were not known to me personally and so their silence was understandable, but thank you to Sir Ian McKellen and Juliet Stevenson for taking the trouble to acknowledge them and again to the former for describing them as 'witty'.

The Tempest

At the end of the play Prospero, the exiled Duke of Milan, renounces his magic powers and with his daughter Miranda departs from the island on which they were cast away twelve years earlier, having been driven out from the dukedom by his ambitious brother.

On the island he had pressed into his service the spirit Ariel, whom he rescued from a witch's punishment, and Caliban, son of that same witch.

At the end of the play Prospero first frees Ariel from his service but leaves stranded on the island the bestial Caliban, whom he has described as 'a thing of darkness' and who has evidently (prior to the play's beginning) tried to rape Miranda.

Caliban

The isle is full of noises. Mostly mine!
The tyrant's gone at last and I am king
of all that I survey. No more a 'thing
of darkness'. No, I am the light and shine
on everywhere. What's here I do not own?
And watch this magic – part the bladderwrack
and gaze into the pool. No nymph sneers back
to scorn my face. I see myself, alone.
Yet one I miss. I would have had her stay,
my slave, or queen. Only the longing's here
while all her beauties fade, become unclear
like dreams I used to cry for. What were they?
Abandoned, not set free, why should I cease
to curse all those who rob me still of peace?

The Two Gentlemen of Verona

Instructed by his master Proteus to present a puppy to Proteus's new love Silvia, whose father is the Duke of Milan, Launce loses it and so attempts to give Silvia his own mongrel, Crab.

As Crab mingles with the Duke's dogs under the table, there is an appalling smell, which Launce instantly recognises as coming from Crab. To save the dog from punishment, Launce claims himself to be the originator of the smell. They both get whipped out of the chamber, but not before Crab has lifted his leg against a woman's farthingale skirt.

Crab

You might think that I did it for a laugh,
the guff beneath the table, but I thought
he'd take it on. Too good to me by half,
there's some would say, but how can you support
your man if you ain't sure he's still in love
with you? I've been around, seen what men do.
I had to know the hand still fits the glove,
that giving me away weren't really true.
We gets thrown out, of course. Then as we go—
the farthingale was simply in the way,
no malice meant. Now he's upset. I know
he's not the sharpest knife, but he's a stray —
and we're a team. All right, he took the blame
for me, but tell you straight, I'd do the same. Yeah.

The Merry Wives of Windsor

The fat knight, Sir John Falstaff, tries to seduce both Mistresses Page and Ford, but the ladies tell their husbands and they all plot a final punishment for him. Mistress Ford invites Falstaff to disguise himself as Herne the Hunter, a ghostly figure with antlers who is associated with a large oak tree in Windsor Park, and to meet her there at midnight.

In the park Falstaff is pinched and taunted by children dressed as fairies and the play ends with everyone laughing at the evening's antics and the humiliation of Falstaff.

Suppose Herne is watching...

Herne

I am betrayed. They do and don't believe
and imitate my rites, pretend my voice
and make of me whatever they conceive
today, as if I bear these horns by choice
and circle round the ravished oak in fun
and call my hounds to chase and sprites to tease
unyoked from penance charged for what I've done.
No. Set down this: I am not what you please.

Was ever Herne so fat? I'm mocked and they
cavort in shapes they do not understand.
You want me in your game? Well then I'll play.
See then a faery justice you'd not planned.
Forgive each other, mortals, while you may,
for I will not and I will have my day.

Measure for Measure

Angelo is made temporary ruler of Vienna and sets about cleaning up the sexual corruption of the city. Claudio is sentenced to death for making his girlfriend pregnant outside of marriage.

Claudio's sister Isabella is about to enter a nunnery but pleads with Angelo for her brother's life. Angelo refuses, but tempted by her purity eventually makes an offer: Claudio's life in exchange for sex with her.

Isabella is horrified but agrees to a short assignation in a secluded garden at midnight, where Mariana, who was once betrothed to Angelo, takes Isabella's place without Angelo realising.

Mariana

I know your question, dear, before you ask.
The substitution, how was that achieved?
Just snuff out all the lights and wear a mask?
Well if a man's so easily deceived,
you'd rightly say he only wants one thing,
but Angelo was driven by all too
precise desires – to share then steal and bring
to earth her sanctity. What could I do
but bind and scarf my hair and pale my face
to blandness, clothe myself in raiment white
and mantle blue? *Oh angel of the night,
behold a virgin pure and full of grace.*
May God forgive us both. I make no boast
of this, but ask of you: who sinned the most?

The Comedy of Errors

The family of Egeon, comprising his wife Emilia and their twin sons and twin servants (all four as babies), is separated at sea during a storm thirty-three years before the play begins. One son, Antipholus, and his servant, Dromio, grow up with Egeon in Syracuse.

Some years before the play starts, this Antipholus set out with Dromio to find his identically named lost brother. His father follows and unknown to each other they both arrive at Ephesus.

The lost twin and servant are living in Ephesus. Emilia is also there, but not knowing that any of her family are still alive has become a nun and subsequently Abbess.

Comic confusion follows before the family is reunited.

Emilia

To have all snatched away and then restored is like some winter's tale where we are shown the pattern for our lives, that we must be obedient to the hope that what we long for may one day appear and if we bear the cost with fortitude and faith, then God may bless us with a gift to cancel all our pain.

And yet for what has been returned, 'restored' is not the word. Four babes I knew have grown to boisterous men who don't remember me and once I had a husband sharp and strong. You say 'rebirth', I say there's too much lost. I live with strangers now and must confess that in my heart I wear the veil again.

Much Ado About Nothing

Don Pedro, Prince of Arragon, and his followers Claudio and Benedick, visit Leonato, Duke of Messina. Claudio falls in love with Leonato's daughter Hero, while Benedick and Leonato's niece Beatrice are engaged in a 'war of wit', scorning love, marriage, and each other. Benedick and Beatrice are tricked into confessing their love for each other and the play ends with a celebration of the marriages of the two couples. Don Pedro remains single.

Early in the play Beatrice had jokingly bemoaned the shortage of good husbands and Don Pedro had suggested himself.

Don Pedro

There was a fleeting moment when I thought she might say yes. The offer was in jest, we both knew that, and yet I think it caught the two of us off guard, as can the best of wit at times – my words just tumbling out, her pause before reply, an instant fraught with possibility before the bout of banter fizzled out and came to naught. Yet what a match that would have been! Can you imagine how my ministers would fare, the faces of my staff as I said, “Do as she commands whenever I’m not there.” Instead, I watch these weddings, knowing more and less than love prowl round a prince’s door.

Love's Labours Lost

The King of Navarre and three companions vow to shut themselves away for three years of study and to renounce other company, especially women, even though the Princess of France and her three ladies are coming to the kingdom. When they meet the women, the men all fall in love. There is some reciprocation of feeling, but the women trick and embarrass the oath-breaking men.

News arrives that the Princess's father has died and she must return at once. The men swear undying love but the ladies insist that they wait a year and a day to prove their faithfulness. The King is set an additional task: to live "in some forlorn and naked hermitage, remote from all the pleasures of the world."

Princess of France

You think I've been too harsh? O come now, what would you then wish for me? My father's dead.
That solves parental choice. And so I wed the king and all is well that ends well? Not that he's forsworn except, it seems, by chance: had our charms not appeared, he had stayed true – so women's fault, again. What must I do?
Conjoin our states, lie back and think of France?
Non. Vraiment non! I owe my father grief, due obsequies, and for these faithless men, unless they change before they marry, then they'll never make the effort. My belief is constant here, for I see hour by hour how women's hopes are crushed by men in power.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Peter Quince, a carpenter, was the director of the 'play within a play', *Pyramus and Thisbe*, performed by the Mechanicals in front of Duke Theseus and his wedding guests in the last act of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Earlier the actors were chased around, or 'led a merry dance' by the mischievous sprite Puck during their play rehearsal in the forest, where the fairy king and queen are in dispute. Having performed their play before the Duke, they might perhaps have thought that their futures could be about to change.

Peter Quince

Unforgettable – our fifteen minutes of fame. Although I would not want to see those days come back – not them. It was as if the rhythm of our lives had somehow skipped a beat and we were made to dance to someone else's tune. You don't believe? That's your bad luck. Unsettling things they are, that mar more than they mend, God save us all.

We were not called again, but then so what? We just went back to what we did before – that's life. It might have changed, but it did not. It's what it is and only fools want more. The magic died afore we realised, and yet – for one sweet moment – we were *prized*.

The Merchant of Venice

The Jewish moneylender Shylock lends money to the Christian merchant, Antonio, setting the security at a pound of Antonio's flesh from next to his heart. This security is in response to Antonio's anti-semitic treatment of Shylock, spitting on him and calling him a dog being specifically described.

When a bankrupt Antonio defaults on the loan, Shylock demands the pound of flesh in the courts, an act of revenge which is behaviour he says he has learned from the Christian ruling class. The legal judgement is that Shylock may have the pound of flesh, but that not one drop of blood is included in the contract. Unable to take the flesh without blood, he is punished by being forced to convert to Christianity, on pain of death, while half his wealth is given to Antonio.

Shylock

The law's an ass. Since when has blood not been a part of flesh? And while we're splitting hairs, may not one strand of body hair be seen upon my bond? No skin? I ask you, where's the sense in this? You ask a Rabbi for the meaning of a word, you'll find he makes it richer, while these Christians strip the poor thing bare. But tell me this. Were there mistakes within the contract? Did I lie? Did he not know exactly what it meant? My crime was only to believe there still could be some simple justice for a Jew. Meantime our God forsakes us and we don't know why, when born a Jew means as a Jew you die.

As You Like It

Before the action of the play begins, Frederick has usurped his brother's dukedom and the exiled brother is hiding with friends in the Forest of Arden. In the last Act, as all the misapprehensions and plot lines are resolved, it is reported that Frederick, on his way with an army to kill his brother, met with 'an old religious man' and 'after some question with him' repented his ways and went to live a monastic life.

The question for the cynic is not so much whether this is possible, but whether it is likely to last.

Frederick

It seemed so simple at the time, so right, but that's the point about conversion. In that very instant when you 'see the light' all complications slip away, all sin appears forgivable, you are possessed by change, like a tide in thrall to the moon, unstoppable, and you enjoy a blessed eternity in seconds. But it soon becomes a memory. No man can live on that alone. I'm not the first to steal his brother's place and old ghosts call to give a helping hand again to Fortune's wheel. Yet politics will drown that rustic fool; then someone else will – simply – have to rule.

The Taming of the Shrew

At the end of the play, which is set in Padua, the headstrong and independent Katherina (the 'shrew') appears to have been 'tamed' by her suitor and then husband Petruchio. In the final scene there is a banquet at which there are three newly married couples: Katherina and Petruchio, Katherina's sister Bianca and Lucentio, and an unnamed widow and Hortensio.

With the women outside of the room, Petruchio proposes a wager whereby each man will send a servant to call for his wife, and whichever comes most obediently will have won. Katherina is the only one who comes, and she delivers an earnest speech to the other wives on why women should always be obedient to their husbands. The women may well wonder what has happened to Katherina.

Bianca

The little minx! We just could not believe our ears. 'What has he done to her?' we thought, so quickly made excuse we must relieve ourselves and had some privy talk. 'He's caught her with another man,' the widow said, 'and knocked her good and hard.' 'There isn't force of argument or fist would turn her head that way,' I said. 'It's something else. Of course it could be some new trick.' And then it dawned. 'It's magic. What can't spells and potions do?' That frightened me. All women must be warned in case he sells it to their husbands too. Imagine what will happen to our lives when men start clamouring for *Paduan wives*.

All's Well that Ends Well

Helena, a physician's daughter, cures the King of France of a life-threatening ailment and is rewarded with marriage to any nobleman she chooses. She selects Bertram, Count of Rossillion, whom she has secretly loved for a long time.

Bertram is absolutely appalled at the match and runs away, leaving a message that he will only be her husband if she fulfils two seemingly impossible conditions. Helena does eventually perform these and on being confronted, Bertram says that he accepts her as his true wife, but in some modern productions he still appears pretty unhappy.

King of France

Will she be happy? That's the question asked around the court by those who place the heart above the head and drive a horse and cart through family. While, as the king, I'm tasked with making judgements where true worth is masked by matters such as blood, I'd say she's smart enough to squeeze some drops of love from part of that great birthright pride in which he's basked too long. Will *he* be happy? Rumour's rife that had he married to his choice, there'd be a mistress here and there, and he can see variety will not now spice his life. But then, who cares? Our *happiness* is not how we'll be judged, remembered and forgot.

Twelfth Night

Viola is shipwrecked on the shores of Illyria, losing contact with her twin brother, Sebastian in the storm. Not knowing if he is dead or alive, she disguises herself for safety as a young man, takes the name Cesario, and enters the service of Duke Orsino.

Orsino believes himself in love with the Lady Olivia and uses Cesario as a go-between. However Olivia finds herself falling in love with this handsome ambassador.

Viola, in turn, has fallen in love with the Duke, who also believes she is a man, and treats her as a personal confidant. When asked about her family, she tells him:

I am all the daughters of my father's house,
And all the brothers too: and yet I know not.

Viola

What don't I know? Not just if Seb still lives –
though how we need a body, warm or cold.
It's what I have and may become that gives
me sleepless nights. Shall I grow old
in this disguise, androgenized by time,
an exile from my sex as well as home?
Or will some *carpe diem* act mean I'm
condemned to states yet further from my own?
He favours me. They whisper that's not chance,
but in what way? Is he *that kind* of man?
Her beauty's stunning. Dodging her advance
is hard. Why not take what and where I can?
I'm shipwrecked twice, more helpless than before,
Afraid to drown, afraid to reach the shore.

The Winter's Tale

Convinced that his pregnant wife Hermione has had an affair with his friend King Polixenes of Bohemia, Leontes, King of Sicilia, denies paternity and at the birth orders the baby girl to be abandoned in a desolate place, which through a courtier's mitigating kindness ends up being the shores of Bohemia.

The Oracle at Delphi clears Hermione, but news comes that her young son Mamillius has died of grief. Hermione faints, is taken out and is pronounced dead. Leontes comes to his senses and vows to visit their grave every day with tears of repentance.

Sixteen years later the girl, raised by shepherds and named Perdita, flees with her young suitor Prince Florizel to Sicilia, pursued by his disapproving father, King Polixenes.

To great joy her true identity as the lost child is soon revealed. Everyone goes to visit a renowned statue of her mother, which appears to come to life. It is indeed Hermione, who has hidden from the world all this time, "knowing that the Oracle gave hope" that Perdita lived.

Hermione

Well then, I have a question just for you.
How old would Prince Mamillius be today?
You see. In all these springtide wonders who
remembers now my winter boy? What great
rejoicing crowds attend on him? So what
do you all want from me? To those who say
I've been too cruel I reply: do not
imagine me incapable of hate.
I am not made of stone. If hope were all
I'd had to live on for these sixteen years
I would be dead indeed. Leontes' tears
have nourished my revenge – and you should call
it that. Why won't you understand I must,
in doing this, have felt his penance just?

King John

A central fictional figure in the play is Philip Falconbridge, an illegitimate son of Richard I and otherwise referred to as The Bastard.

The boy Prince Arthur has some claim to the English throne and his cause against King John is backed by the King of France and the Duke of Austria. Arthur dies in a fall while trying to escape imprisonment by John. A number of nobles, excluding the Bastard, go over to the French side, but they switch allegiance back again when they discover that the French King means to execute them once he has deposed John.

A French invasion of England is repulsed but John is poisoned by a monk and dies even as the French ask for terms. The Bastard survives all the turmoil but one may wonder what enquiries might be held into his and others' conduct in the aftermath of the war.

The Bastard

I was a good servant to a bad king.
Does that make me bad too? Some times I'd save
him from himself. At others I would do
what must be done. So do you think I ought
to be more like these true-born lords who sing
a different tune each day, who when they gave
their backing to Prince Arthur's horse, deemed who
was in the saddle scarcely worth a thought?
I'm not legitimate, don't own a voice,
but I am loyal to my fatherland.
Since you now press me on my 'moral choice',
I will explain exactly where I stand:
however evil, weak or false our kings,
I'll fight all foreign powers that seek to pull their strings.

Richard II

The Duke of York is a most ardent supporter of King Richard II against the growing power and claims to the throne of Henry Bolingbroke, but later gets caught defenceless at Berkeley Castle and declares himself neutral.

Not long afterwards, he appears as an equally ardent supporter of Bolingbroke, to the extent that when he discovers his own son, The Duke of Aumerle, plotting with others to kill Bolingbroke at Oxford, he denounces him and demands the death penalty. The Duchess of York pleads for her son's life, which Bolingbroke grants.

The Duke of Aumerle

I thought in this I knew my father's mind,
that his allegiance to the anointed king
could not be bought or broken, but I find
my faith, like his, misplaced; the very thing
I most admired in him, untrue. He tries
to be a new Saint Paul who's seen the light,
but Bolingbroke's no god to blind his eyes.
He's done that for himself, without a fight.
So now I owe the very air I breathe
to Bolingbroke. It's not my mother's pleas
have saved me, but his policy to wreath
a garland made of guilt around our knees.
We fall into his trap. Bled dry of will,
with nowhere else to go, we must lie still.

Henry IV Part I

Among King Henry IV's troubles is the behaviour of his son and heir Prince Hal (the future Henry V), who has forsaken the court to spend his time drinking with low life companions, such as Poins, Bardolph and the fat, cowardly and corrupt knight, Sir John Falstaff. Falstaff sees himself as a father figure to the prince, encouraging his riotous behaviour.

The prince's reversion back to the noble behaviour expected of him is foreshadowed in a tavern scene in which he pretends to be the king and berates Falstaff for his riotous behaviour and his expectations of high office when Hal becomes king. At the end of Henry IV Part II, the newly crowned Henry V will reject Falstaff utterly.

Poins

Good lad, the prince. He's just like one of us, except he ain't, and that fat fool won't see he's not. A man of sense, with all the fuss that's buzzing round the prince's ears, would be a mite more cautious, wouldn't brag about his 'royal patronage', how but for name he's second father to the king no doubt we soon will have. 'Cos that's a dangerous game. Just learn from history. The hands that rocked the cradle, all those uncles, cousins bred to think they had the next in line safe locked in their embrace, now shorter by a head. He'll claim, of course, he's been misunderstood, but mark my words, this will not come to good.

Henry IV Part II

At the end of the play Prince Hal is crowned as Henry V. As he leaves the coronation, he is met by Falstaff, who believes he will receive special favour, his preference being to be made Lord Chief Justice. However, the king turns him away – “I know thee not old man” – and banishes him from coming within ten miles of his person, unless he can mend his ways.

Falstaff's offstage death is reported in the Folio text of Henry V in words that have caused scholars some head-scratching: “his nose was as sharp as a pen and a table of green fields.” Most editors now follow the suggestion by Lewis Theobald in 1726 that this should be “and 'a babbled of green fields”.

This sonnet offers a different interpretation.

Falstaff

I never saw it coming. Well, who would?
To be dumped on from such a height and cast
aside like an old wineskin. It is past
a cure. Old John shall soon be dead. Then, good
my prince, think on what you have done. I had
believed your love to be like mine for you,
I know it is. This cannot be your true
design. There's something here smells bad,
a stench of policy by those, bereft
of common touch, who now surround your state
and sweep the public way of all who late
enjoyed your company. So what is left?
My table laid at Greenfields, where I'll spend
my last remaining days... until you send.

Henry V

Wandering incognito amongst his soldiers on the eve of the Battle of Agincourt, King Henry meets three of his footsoldiers discussing their chances of survival. One, Michael Williams, gets into an argument with Henry over whether the King would let himself be ransomed and they exchange gloves to wear in their caps so that if they both live, they can recognise each other after the battle and settle the argument.

They meet again shortly after the victory when Henry reveals who he really is, but rewards Williams for his honour and bravery.

Under Henry's son, Henry VI, the country falls into civil war, the Wars of the Roses.

[By his name and the fact that he serves under Captain Gower, it is reasonable to suppose Williams may be Welsh and the sonnet is written with a Welsh voice in mind – hence some of the syntax.]

Michael Williams

I met him once, you know, just man to man,
that night before the battle, when each one
of us looked deep in his own soul. And none
more so than he, I say. And then I ran
into him after, when he showed him like
a king, and put me in my place – as right
it was. Long time ago, my boy, when bright
stars shone, but this I swear, he'd have the strike
of my good arm again if he were here.
Yet how could such a man have such a son?
You tell me that. Today there isn't one
of them for whom I'd even shed a tear.
And now you tell me it's take sides I should.
You make your choice. Pray God it does you good.

Henry VI Part I

Henry VI is more inclined to scholarship than power politics and he is unable to prevent what starts as a petty quarrel eventually splitting the nobility into two factions: those who support the Duke of Somerset, shown by a red rose, and those supporting Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York, indicated by a white rose. This division grows in intensity.

Meanwhile war in France over English possessions oscillates between victory and defeat. Near Bordeaux the army led by Lord Talbot is trapped by the French and he sends for reinforcements. Both York and Somerset fail to help him, blaming each other for the debacle, and the English army is routed and Talbot killed.

The Duke of Exeter, Henry VI's uncle, is as close to an objective observer of events as one can find in the play.

Exeter

You make a peace, you break a peace, you make the peace again. You break the peace abroad to keep the peace at home, diverting stored up grievances before men dare forsake allegiances they owe. In foreign war there will be spoils the king can share, while battle does some *cleansing* here and there. You might conceive that's what the French are for!

But now domestic quarrels blight our cause in France and good men die for lack of help from those commanded to their aid. The whelp defies the sire and scratches at his sores. God save us when success against our foes depends upon the colour of a rose.

Henry VI Part 2

Henry VI marries Margaret of Anjou, through whom the Duke of Suffolk hopes to influence the king. However, Suffolk ends up being banished and then captured and beheaded by a pirate. His is one of many heads to be cut off in this play.

Richard, Duke of York, believes himself to be the rightful king, from the line broken by Henry IV's seizure of the throne, and gets a former soldier of his, Jack Cade, to start a rebellion. If Cade receives common support (he is being used as a test), Richard will bring back the army that he commands in Ireland, sent there to suppress Irish uprisings, and march on London.

After causing much bloodshed and mayhem on the streets of London at the head of a rioting rabble of working men, of which Dick the Butcher is one, Cade is defeated and killed. Richard nonetheless declares open war on the king and the Wars of the Roses begins.

Dick the Butcher

It's heads on poles, that's what we want to see,
some heads on poles. And you know why? And how
it is Jack Cade has won my voice though he
don't own one drop of royal blood, not now
nor never has, we all know that. It's 'cos
these mighty lords and city gents they think
it all just happens, like it somehow was
God's plan their tables groan with meat and drink
and fires warm their halls. We know the way
it works. We make, they take. But we won't be
invisible no more and come the day
we rule ourselves then all men shall be free.
I grant our Jack is rather short of brains –
but what have we to lose except our chains?

Henry VI Part 3

During the Wars of the Roses, England's fifteenth century civil war, King Edward IV is held prisoner in a form of house arrest at the estate of the Archbishop of York.

He has some freedom within the estate and one day while out hunting, he is rescued by Lord Hastings and Richard, Duke of Gloucester (later to be King Richard III).

With horses waiting, they intercept Edward and an accompanying huntsman. Having revealed some of their plans out loud, Edward asks the huntsman if he will go with them. That's a tricky one to answer...

Huntsman

Yes I remember it, like yesterday,
that moment when a simple question gave
the choice of three ways I could die. To stay
was certain hanging, for it would not save
my life to just protest my innocence,
that I'd known nothing of their plan. To go
with them was dangerous, for what pretence
would serve if we were caught? How should I know
that they would treat me fair, when in between
their words there hovered those that were not said:
could they trust me with what I'd heard and seen,
would they be better off if I was dead?
I live. But sometimes in the darkling hours
I hear lost cries from wars that were not ours.

Richard III

The play charts the seemingly inexorable rise of Richard, Duke of Gloucester, to the crown through the murder of pretty much anyone standing in his way, including his brother Clarence and his nephews (the Princes in the Tower).

In one remarkable scene, Richard encounters Anne Neville, widow of the son of Henry VI, as she accompanies the latter's body carried by soldiers to burial at Chertsey. Richard proceeds to woo her, even though he killed both her husband and his father.

Silkily persuasive, he offers Anne his sword to kill him if she wishes, but she appears eventually to give way to his courtship. Having married her, Richard later discards her and subsequently glibly remarks that she has "bid this world good night".

Anne

Don't tell me you thought too that I succumbed
to what he calls his charms. I could not kill
him then, with witnesses, and lacking skill
to use his sword with certainty, still numbed
by so much grief. Yet in my heart I knew
I must get close to him and choose my time.
He's clever, dangerous, with vices I'm
not willing to reveal to even you.
And yes, to others I still made believe
I was seduced by 'honey words'. There lay
my safety, so I thought, whichever way
they faced. I was out of my depth, naive.
He sucks the soul from you, the very breath –
and I should be glad of another death.

Henry VIII

The play covers the period of Henry's divorce from Catherine of Arragon and marriage to Anne Boleyn, ending 3 years before the latter's arrest and execution, so that the final speech can be a paean to the future glorious rule of her baby daughter, who will be Queen Elizabeth I.

The fall of Cardinal Wolsey is depicted but the subject of the Reformation is rather sketched over. However, the enmity between Bishop Gardiner of Winchester and Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, is a significant plot thread, Gardiner calling Cranmer 'a sectary' – meaning here a protestant.

Henry has given Cranmer a ring which he shows to the Council members plotting his arrest and they suddenly realise he has the king's personal protection. Under Henry's gaze, Gardiner is made to swear brotherly love with Cranmer.

Bishop Gardiner

He is a heretic and I will see
him burn. One day. One day. I know that while
he has the king's protection I must smile
at him: "Dear Cranmer, let our quarrels be
but intellectual discussions, not
a war." But to permit him to infect
the people with the filth of this new sect
will cause my soul as well as theirs to rot.

Can you conceive there's more than one true way
to worship God? Absurd! God's will is plain
to all not blinded by their pride. Christ's reign
demands unerring vigilance each day,
and bowing to the burden placed on me,
I watch and wait for what I know will be.

Troilus and Cressida

During the Trojan War, the Trojan prince Troilus falls in love with Cressida, the daughter of the priest Calchas, who has defected to the Greek side. Calchas asks the Greek commanders to secure an exchange of Cressida for a Trojan prisoner and this takes place the morning after the lovers have spent their first night together.

Cressida is given into the care of the Greek lord Diomedes, who rebuffs Troilus's pleas for kindness towards her by declaring he will treat Cressida solely according to his estimation of her beauty and worth.

During a short truce in which the Trojan commanders enjoy hospitality in the Greek camp, Troilus spies on Cressida and discovers that despite her promises, she has become Diomedes' lover.

Diomedes

You name the game and I will prove to you
that I can play as well as any man.
The honour of a Hector? Oh I'll do
my best to kill you on the field, yet can
show mercy if you prove no match. And know
that in a truce you are my honoured guest.
The unstraight ways of Ulysses? They flow
like second nature in a Grecian breast.
The passion of a Paris? Now you talk.
When beauty's ripe for plucking, then vows mean
just what you like and be assured I'll baulk
at nothing, be she serving girl or queen.
Alas poor Troilus, I now have his whore –
what you might call a common spoil of war.

Coriolanus

Having won the title 'Coriolanus' by almost superhuman feats on the battlefield in taking the city of Corioli in the war between Rome and the Volsces, Caius Marcius is persuaded to stand for Consul in Rome. To be confirmed in this position he needs the approval of the common people, but he is uncompromising in his scorn for them and is banished for fear of causing an uprising.

Sicinius is one of the People's Tribunes, representatives of the Roman plebeians, and he knows well how to manipulate people to engineer Coriolanus's banishment.

Sicinius

He could not give and would not take. No sense of politics at all, though he was right about the common herd – base, fickle, dense, so easily persuaded that the night is day by anyone who knows the trick of it. You say we twist the people's will. It's no more than the art of rhetoric so highly praised up there, on their fine hill. We simply do it more up front down here to make it plain we're fighting for their sakes. You want their votes, you play the part, endear yourself, cajole, do anything it takes. So what if things get dressed up on the way? You've seen his truth stark naked. Like it, eh?

Titus Andronicus

Having defeated the Goths, Titus Andronicus brings their Queen Tamora, her three sons and her servant Aaron the Moor to Rome as captives. He then kills Tamora's eldest son, in revenge for the the deaths of many of his own sons in the war. Emperor Saturninus marries Tamora, who plans revenge on Titus.

Aaron persuades Tamora's sons to kill Bassanius, betrothed to Titus's daughter Lavinia, and to rape Lavinia. To prevent discovery, they cut out her tongue and cut off her hands, but she writes their names in the dirt using a stick held in her mouth.

In a final bloodbath Titus serves up Tamora's sons to her in a pie at a banquet and then kills Tamora, Saturninus kills Titus and Titus's remaining son Lucius kills Saturninus. Aaron, condemned to a slow death, remains unrepentant of his hand in all this, only regretting he had not done more evil in his life.

Aaron

What's wrong with murder, mutilation, rape?
You have no qualms to see them on the stage.
It is illusion, you will say, the shape
and not the substance. You would not engage
with them for real. Oh no? I give you war.
If not for power, lust or wealth you would
act out your darkest thoughts, are you so sure
that when the rules are smeared in blood you could
keep held in check what you already know
lies sleeping by the hearth? What if your pack
should run tonight? You'll say you cannot go,
or, scenting now the kill, you must turn back?
Don't bleat to me of what you would not do.
I know exactly what I am. Do you?

Romeo and Juliet

The peace of Verona is frequently broken by the brawling of the rival families of the Montagues and Capulets. Montague's son Romeo and his friends, including his cousin Benvolio, sneak into a masked ball at the Capulets, where Romeo falls in love with Juliet, Capulet's daughter. Their intense but secretly pursued love ultimately ends in their suicides.

As the play closes, there appears to be peace made between the two heads of the families, as each declares that he will raise a statue of the other's child. However, Montague says there will be no statue valued so highly as that of Juliet, while Capulet counters that Romeo's will be just "as rich".

Benvolio

You think it's over? God, I wish it was.
Right now they can't agree on what to do
for these memorials. The subject's clear,
but artists, styles, materials and who
unveils what where and when, all stalled because
they cannot stop competing. Is it spite?
Or vanity? Whichever, I just fear
now vulgar shows of wealth are how they fight.
Besides, to sculpt each other's child is bound
to aggravate the slightest sense of wrong:
did Juliet have a figure quite so round
and were her lover's arms in fact that long?
Why bother? For it's fast becoming plain,
my friends, like all the rest, have died in vain.

Timon of Athens

Timon is a wealthy and generous friend to the arts and the rich and powerful, constantly offering gifts and hospitality without expectation of return. Being wedded to his self-image as Mr Generosity, however, he outspends his resources, ignoring the urgent warnings of his steward Flavius and constantly asserting that all will be well.

When the money run out and Timon calls upon his supposed friends for help, they all desert him. Only Flavius remains true.

After inviting his former associates to a banquet where he serves stones for bread, Timon retreats to a cave outside the city where he becomes a hermit, railing against people and life in misanthropic fury. His lonely death there is reported at the end of the play.

Flavius

I ask again, what more could I have done?
You tell a man who cannot swim that here
the water deepens but he will have none
of it and says: 'Don't speak to me of fear.
Some other time must do for that.' And so
you watch him drown. His fault or yours? Why should
I take responsibility? I'm no
more than a steward. Yet I understood
that honest generosity can't feed
itself, while, lost in dreams of better friends,
he thought his gifts would in his hour of need
become investments reaping dividends
and proved to be, when ultimately pressed,
sick of self-love, no better than the rest.

Julius Caesar

In a triumphal march through the city of Rome Julius Caesar is three times offered a crown by the people. He refuses to take the role of a king, but there are many senators, including Brutus, Cassius and Cinna, who fear that Caesar does wish to be an absolute ruler and they assassinate him on the Capitol.

Amidst the street violence that follows, the innocent poet Cinna is for a moment mistaken for the conspirator Lucius Cinna,. Clarification of his true identity does not prevent his being lynched by the mob. This citizen thinks that is still justified.

Citizen

He was another Cinna, yeah, but that don't mean he didn't still deserve to die. He wasn't one of us and I shan't cry no tears for him – some stuck up bitch's brat who wouldn't normally give such as me a moment's thought. Wrong place, wrong time, that's how it goes, tough titty mate, 'cos just for now it's us in charge. We own the streets, you see. But we're not fools. We know when we are used and when we've done their dirty work, they'll hit us hard again, they always do. They lit the fires, but we will be the ones accused. So while we've got our chance, we'll take some down. This ain't to do with Caesar and a crown.

Macbeth

After Macbeth has murdered King Duncan to grab the Scottish throne, he maintains power by a reign of terror. Macduff slips away to England, without telling his family, to raise the help of an English army to defeat Macbeth.

His wife thinks he has abandoned her and the children. Unable to reach Macduff himself, Macbeth has Macduff's wife and children killed.

The English army and rebelling Scottish forces defeat Macbeth. Macduff kills Macbeth himself in single combat.

So that's all right then? Time passes...

Macduff

"He does not love us." That is what I'm told she said before they- "He... does not... love us." And still the common view is I should hold my head up high; did not the murderous usurper fall to my sword and my just revenge? How just? His death does not begin to pay the price of them and of the trust my wife thought I'd betrayed to save my skin. Could I have saved them, got them out somehow? If I myself had killed them one by one they had been spared the worst of what was done, such things as make my skin crawl even now. And haunting me beneath my deepest fears, "He does not love us" whispers down the years.

Hamlet

Osric is the flamboyant professional courtier who on behalf of the Danish King Claudius delivers the challenge to Hamlet for the fencing match with Laertes, which will ultimately leave the dead bodies of Hamlet, Laertes, Claudius and Queen Gertrude on the stage at the end of the play and the throne passing to the Norwegian Prince Fortinbras.

When delivering the challenge, Osric is mocked by Hamlet and his friend Horatio for using ultra-fashionable words and for constantly flourishing his hat. Early on in the encounter, Hamlet turns to Horatio and asks, "Dost know this waterfly?"

For Osric, now under Fortinbras's rule, the old certainties of court life will have been swept away.

Osric

He called me a waterfly. I heard him plain as I'm standing here. Said it to his friend – good looking boy, and cultured in a way you don't often find round here – but not for me, not... not with... *you know*. Oh, call it a whim if you like – the hat – but for him to send me up like that! I was in the king's pay, a right royal messenger. So was he really mad, you ask. I think not. Sharp, sly, cruel, bitter, twisted even, but he knew what he was doing, oh yes, so why should I be sorry that he's dead? I'll tell you why. Now we must learn Norwegian ways, who's who, what's in, what's out, what words can make you die.

King Lear

King Lear divides his kingdom amongst his three daughters on the basis of how much they say they love him, but the youngest, Cordelia, refuses to flatter and is banished.

Less well treated by his other two daughters, Goneril and Regan, than he expects, Lear descends into madness during a stupendous storm on a barren heath. He is accompanied by an unnamed Fool who constantly reminds him, through sharp jibes laced with truth, of his current and previous lack of judgement.

Lear is eventually rescued by Cordelia, but they are captured by forces of Goneril and Regan. Cordelia is murdered in the prison and the play ends with Lear carrying in her lifeless body and dying himself. The Fool is nowhere to be seen, having simply disappeared from the play in Act III, no-one knows where.

The Fool

You seek a name? Then tell it like it is.
You'll wrap it up in wit of course, but don't
get lost in that. The fool that looks to his
best comedy for his salvation won't
unlock it there. The truth is your last hedge
before insanity, your shield against
the gross injustice of our trade, a wedge
between your place and those you have incensed.
I need another drink if you want more.
Why wish to be like me? I live at my
wit's end – a beauty once but now a whore
I can't enjoy, give up, or satisfy.
No. Get thee to a nunnery; conceive
no more ambitions. See me and believe.

Othello

Othello is appointed temporary Military Governor of Cyprus by the Venetian rulers. Through various subterfuges the villainous Iago plants in Othello's mind the idea that Othello's wife, Desdemona, and his recently sacked lieutenant, Cassio, are secret lovers. Othello succumbs to an overpowering jealousy and kills Desdemona.

When Desdemona's innocence is revealed, Othello kills himself, Iago is arrested and Cassio is appointed as the new Governor of Cyprus.

But rumours have a life of their own...

Cassio

You would have thought, the great man being dead
and patently of unsound mind towards
the end, some line might just be drawn beneath
this sorry business, that the slender cords
that bound us to his madness might be snipped,
but no, it all begins to rear its head
again – 'no smoke without...', 'he must have slipped
her one', 'can't keep his sword within its sheath',
oh yes, the rumour mill is working at full pelt;
and here's an irony to crown the lot:
I'm Governor, but never have I felt
less in control, more victim of a plot.
The evil that men do lives after them,
in wounds whose bloody lips we cannot stem!

Antony and Cleopatra

This character, only named as Clown, delivers the asps (small poisonous snakes from the Nile) to Cleopatra so that she can take her own life, rather than be hauled as a captive through the streets of Rome by Octavius Caesar.

The clown is portrayed as a simpleton, but he could be more than that...

Clown

Five stinking years on a Roman galley,
that was the cost of that little trade.
Should have been the chop but I got pally
with a guard who had a problem with a maid,
as was. 'Cos I'm a fixer, see, I get
what people want. You've heard I'm simple? Where's
you been? That's just a game I play. It's kept
my head when all around were losing theirs.
The queen would like some asps. Oh yeah? What could
I do but sort the goods and play it dumb.
You never crossed her even when you should
with mighty Caesar storming up your- How's
your father these days? New world order now,
but you got a need, you know where to come.

Cymbeline

Posthumus Leonatus is banished from Britain when his secret marriage to Imogen, daughter of King Cymbeline, is discovered. While abroad, he becomes convinced of Imogen's infidelity, unaware that the evidence is false. He rejects his wife, while secretly ordering his servant Pisanio to murder her. Pisanio reveals the plot to Imogen and she escapes to Wales disguised as a boy.

She is pursued by Cloten, unintelligent son of Cymbeline's new Queen, who herself exhibits almost fairy-tale deceit and wickedness, and has already tried to poison Imogen. Cloten is killed, various deceptions are unmasked, Imogen and Posthumus are reunited and orders are given for the still unnamed Queen to be arrested.

Queen

Yes, yes, I'll tell you what you want – confess, if that's the word will please. I do not love the king. What's there to love? How true he's been to me, I'll let you guess. As for his precious daughter she has been a thorn in his side just as much as mine. Succession is the game we play. Which line goes down in history. Tell me, what queen alive would not do as I've done to see her issue crowned. Else what's the point? And Cloten's all I've ever loved. Anoint another and you disinherit me. Well then. If he is lost, then so am I and you're too late to sentence me to die

Pericles

The medieval poet John Gower introduces each act with a prologue in octosyllabic rhyme. Seeking the hand of the daughter of the King of Antioch, Prince Pericles has to solve a riddle or die. He understands that the riddle reveals incest between the daughter and father and flees home to Tyre, pursued by an assassin. He leaves Tyre to escape but is shipwrecked on the shores of Pentapolis, where he wins the hand of Princess Thaisa in a tournament.

Sailing back to Tyre Thaisa appears to die in childbirth and her body is cast to the sea in a coffin. Pericles leaves the baby Marina to be brought up by King and Queen of Tharsus. On reaching adulthood, she is kidnapped and sold to a brothel in Mytilene, where she persuades the pimps and clients that they should seek virtue.

Wandering at sea, catatonic with grief, Pericles arrives at Mytilene where he is reunited with Marina. Told in a dream to go to the temple at Ephesus, he finds Thaisa, whose coffin was washed ashore there and who was revived by a physician.

Gower

A story is a wondrous thing.
A sin uncovered here will bring
a flight, a birth, a death, a child
both saved and lost, a father wild
with grief then fettered in despair,
his mind adrift, he knows not where.
Who can weave these strands together
except he be a story teller?
Would you prefer I told a tale
of ordinary lives that fail
to rise above or sink below
the daily cares that we all know?
Lie there, my art, now it's revealed
a tapestry the threads concealed.

Appendix

During the 2014-15 attempts to bring this project to wider public presentation for the 2016 Shakespeare anniversary, a variety of proposals were made to Channel 4, BBC Radio 3 and Radio 4 by the independent producer Roger Elsgood, who had taken an interest. However, Channel 4 announced they were terminating the 4Thought series at which the proposal was aimed, so were taking no new material. Radio 4 likewise indicated they were then not actively seeking new material for the 15 minute slots envisaged.

In June 2014 Roger emailed me that he ‘took the sonnet idea into R3 this afternoon and it was received rather warmly; there was much discussion of possibilities’ and he was asked to leave the full set of sonnets for further perusal. However the final answer from the commissioners on 9 October was: ‘Many thanks for developing this idea. In the end, we decided to go with a different overall plan for the 2016 Shakespeare anniversary – one more focused on the year of 1616 itself.’

One proposal put forward involved extracts from extant BBC recordings of five of Shakespeare’s best known plays and three sonnets for each play written by myself. As I only had one sonnet per play at this stage, I had to construct some more. The proposal faltered before I had completed that task, but the additional sonnets written are given here in case of interest.

Ophelia turns out to be a chameleon sonnet. Conceived when being written as a run-upstairs-and-slam-the-bedroom-door teenage wail, it was brought to my notice by Roger’s colleague Willi Richards that the tone and intent change entirely when it is delivered to Polonius’s face.

Lancelot Gobbo, however, was written as part of the original sequence, but I pulled it out after writing *Shylock*, as the latter is more in keeping with the others, featuring a Shakespearean character, while *Gobbo* presents a somewhat caricatured actor’s reaction to being given the character part.

Claudius [Hamlet]

A play will prick my conscience! Well, is that what he imagines? As if I don’t face my conscience every day I wake. God’s grace is spent elsewhere. What’s done is done and at whatever final trump there may or may not be I’ll make my answer, but not now, not now. He tells me that he knows. Yet how that is... must never see the light of day. In whom has he confided? Any *friends*? Ophelia perhaps? How many must be silenced when there’s no-one I can trust to know the truths on which my crown depends? Act now, or wait – that is the question here, and I must choose alone which course to steer.

Ophelia [Hamlet]

I did what I was told. I did! And look what’s happened now. It wasn’t meant to be like this. It’s all gone wrong. They told me he would say he did love me or that I took his friendship for much more than he had meant. But this, this raging in his mind is more than I can bear and all my fault, I’m sure it is. My father’s never wrong. He’s spent his life advising kings. He must be right. What else could make the prince be so distressed and change so suddenly, as if possessed by some dark demon coming in the night? And what was I supposed to do instead? It’s hopeless. Oh I wish that I was dead!

Porter [Macbeth]

Well I was porter there that night. I know it was an inside job, 'cos no-one got past me, but who exactly done it's not been proved. Who was it struck the fatal blow? It could have been the grooms, but why, unless they'd all gone mad? The sons did flee, but so did I. Are you accusing me? Macbeth – prime suspect, ay, but two steps shy at least of being king 'cos in the way there'd still be Malcolm. No, my money's on her ladyship. Dark waters there and gone all funny lately, weird, or so they say. But this I ken. There's many more than one has cause to wish that wicked deed undone.

Fleance [Macbeth]

They fought together, saved each other's lives and called each other friend. Yet what did those acts mean when once ambition's head arose? My father surely should have known the knives would soon be out for us. He shut his eyes to what he did not want to see and chose to bide his time, a time that only shows that patience is no virtue for the wise. I'll never make the same mistake. I know that buried in each heart lie things we may scarce tell ourselves, but they will rise one day and I'll not stand deceived by outward show, not least my own, despite what I must do to make the prophecy for me come true.

Launcelot Gobbo [The Merchant of Venice]

If I am honest, I'm not really sure quite what my role is here. A servant, yes. A comic servant – ah, that may be more than what you get. I would like to impress you with my wit extraordinaire, but I don't seem to have the lines for that. One speech of middling humour second raters try in bad auditions, but no gems, no peach to pluck in peroration. Dull, dead dross, the lot of it. Where is the rapier wit, the cunning play of words that speaks of loss and triumph in one breath? There is no grit. It's flabby stuff and flabby's not my style, but rent dictates I *gobbo* for a while.