

*The Other
Shakespeare*

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Every third birth shall be for the grave. The words rang in Judith Shakespeare's ears as she picked up the looking glass with the ornate, gold trimmed handle, and spied again her heavy blond locks and clear blue eyes. It was always startling, to see her own face reflected in such sharp outline and detail. It was nothing like looking in the waters of the Avon, the cold dark waters which rushed by with such urgent speed, ferrying leaves and branches and thick clumps of dirt on their way to the next village, her visage in the current too broken and cracked to grasp. Judith liked looking in the glass, as if into the eyes of a stranger, a petite, pretty, but somewhat distant stranger whose mysteries had yet to be discovered. Though every time she did she couldn't help but also remember the words her mother had cried to her father before she begged him to give the gift away: *Every third birth shall be for the grave.*

"'Tis nonsense," her father had said, trying to tease his wife, Mary, into not worrying so much about the silly predictions of a soothsayer more than sixteen years before.

"She stopped the deaths," Mary reminded him, almost afraid to acknowledge this truth out loud.

John nodded, grateful as well that the potion the white witch had given them had stopped the deaths of their children. After John, their first, had died even before making it past the lying-in, and Margaret, their second, had died before a full sun had passed, he had been nearly as upset as his wife over the inability of their children to hold onto life. But now they had five beautiful issues: Judith, William, Gilbert, Joan and Anne, all alive, all healthy, all proving the witch's prophecy that for every three births one child would have to die, wrong. He wished Mary would just let it go already. She held on to this prospect of future grief like the truly devout held onto a well worn set of rosary beads, clicking and counting them all day long. More than anything, John was annoyed that his expensive gift of a beautifully wrought Italian hand mirror, which he'd paid nearly ten pounds for on his previous trip to Coventry, was being spurned by his wife.

"I can't keep it," she pleaded, "it reminds me too much of the witch's mirror. I beseech you, take it back."

Instead, John had given the gift to his oldest daughter, Judith, for use as a prop in her games of playacting. And every time she went out to the forest with the rest of her brothers and sisters to put on a show, she couldn't help but look into it.

"Judith," William Shakespeare called, walking up to his older sister, "have you chosen the props for today's play yet?"

Judith quickly folded the looking glass into its linen cover. She could hear her younger brothers and sisters laughing and shouting in the clearing behind her. It was another warm summer afternoon, the trees thick with foliage, the scent of mint and sweetbriar strong in the air, the give of pliant dirt soft beneath her knees. She picked out a few props from the pile before her and walked with William back to the space where her other brother, Gilbert, and her two sisters, Joan and Anne, were waiting.

She handed Gilbert the gnarled oak cane, indicating that he got to play the gouty king for a second week in a row. Gilbert grinned in appreciation and thrust the cane hard into the ground before him. Judith bestowed the queen's crown made of braided twigs and bindweed on her sister Joan, who smiled broadly and worked to pin the crown into her long brown hair. Anne, the youngest and

littlest of the Shakespeare children, Judith gave the fan made of chicken feather and string.

“Hold this up when I tell you to,” she instructed. “You shall be the cover that the maid and the prince hide behind when they seek to run away.”

Anne nodded seriously, glad to have been given a role in the production and determined to do a good job.

“And you William,” Judith said, walking over to the brother closest in age to herself, “you shall be the prince.” She handed him the wooden sword they’d whittled out of a piece of elm. It had a long leather strap wrapped around the handle which William carefully unraveled and rewound around his stomach, so that the sword hung from his side in the manner of a true gentleman.

“Wait! Wait! Anon, don’t forget me!” Running up the path, nearly tripping over a tree root, was Richard Whateley, their neighbor. He always wanted to be a part of the Shakespeare family games, even when he wasn’t actually invited. Judith sighed, but then walked over to the pile of props and chose for Richard a threadbare black hat. He would be the prince’s man-in-waiting, his lookout, when the prince and the maid made their escape.

Judith carefully laid the rest of the items aside, the old teething coral that was handy as a magic wand, the dirty white gloves rescued from their father’s workshop, the clubs, shields, and knives made of wood, leather, and stuffed cloth that the children had put a lot of time and effort into crafting. She arranged Gilbert and Joan in the middle of the clearing, facing each other but turned slightly askance, and then gave the signal to start the performance.

“My true and honorable wife,” Gilbert began, his head held high like the king he thought he was. “My faithful helpmate, why do you forsake me now? Why do you choose a son’s love over a husband’s? Over your kingdom’s? The people will not stand for an errant prince and an ignoble princess. She must be sent away and he must be made to do his duty; to his family and to the throne.” Gilbert paused and leant on his cane, “I insist on being the master of what is mine own. My goods, my chattel, my fields, and most certainly,” he eyed his wife, “my son.”

“Yes, thy husband,” Joan replied, her eyes downcast but her voice strong. Judith was pleased with the effort; Joan had finally struck the right balance between the demure, respectful wife, and the strong-willed, determined queen.

Judith sat on a tree stump and watched - her part as the maid wouldn't come on for a few more acts anyway. William entered the scene and engaged the king and queen in an argument. “Never doubt that I love her,” he told his parents, chin held high. “Doubt that the stars are fire, doubt that the sun does move, doubt truth to be a liar, but never doubt my love.” Judith was reminded, again, of William's ability to develop a phrase. All she had to do was feed him an idea and he came up with poetry inspired phrases. She sat back and crossed her arms and watched the rest of the scene play out.

Judith had been directing her younger brothers and sisters in “playacting” (as their father liked to call it), in “nuisance” (is how their mother referred to it), for as long as she could remember. From the time she could walk she was picking things up around the house and playing with them in rich stories of make-believe secretly imagined. When her brother William was born she immediately took to dressing him and feeding him and talking to him about all the things that went on in her head. As soon as he could walk Judith used him as a prop in her games, and after he began to talk, Judith gave him well-defined roles. William liked playing the part of a soldier, or even a fool, but oddly, he never liked being king. When Gilbert, Joan, and Anne were born one right after the other a few years later, Judith finally had the beginnings of a troupe where she could put on full productions.

Which the children did, nearly every Sunday afternoon after church. After the priest had finished his sermon and the Symons twins in the row ahead of them had been woken up with a loud rap on the knuckles, Gilbert poked William and William poked Joan and all the Shakespeare children rushed to be the first out of the cold stone building. They sprinted home, the hot afternoon sun warming their cold limbs and backsides sore from the hard, damp pews. In the summertime the luscious greens of Stratford's streets displaced the images of the whitewashed church walls from their memory, the eerie walls which tried, but didn't quite cover, the

illicit Catholic paintings from before King Henry's time. Once at home, out of their Sunday best and triumphant again in their rumpled day clothes, the children would finish their chores and then head out together as a group to the forest. Judith, William, Gilbert, and Joan carried the props from the shed behind the house, while Anne dragged the wool blanket she needed when she got sleepy. The children walked to a clearing where they knew they could talk and shout as loudly as they wanted, and no adults would beat them for it.

"But I fail to understand," Richard said to Judith after the story they'd been acting came to an end. "Why did the prince and the maid have to seek shelter in France? Couldn't they have stayed at court and married? Didn't the king and queen understand that they were in love?"

"They understood. It mattered not."

Richard looked crestfallen.

"Sometimes love is not enough," Judith said, more patiently this time. "In this instance, the kingdom was more important. Preserving the family line and not marrying an inappropriate commoner was - and is - more important than anything else."

"'Tis sad," Richard couldn't help but say, even though he knew it made him look babyish.

"Be glad you're not royalty, nor even a wealthy nobleman," Judith remonstrated. "They have to marry whom their parents tell them to. At least when you're without braveries, you can fall in love with anyone."

Richard squinted into the sun. He had never thought of that. His parents were always complaining that they didn't have enough money for pottage, or pie, or a decent cup of ale; that if only they had more money they could buy some linen and set a respectable table. Richard couldn't count how many times he'd watched his parents yell at each other over who had spent the last farthing, it was so often. It was a revelation to him to think that being poor could actually be better in some ways. Judith always said the oddest things. He'd have to think this one over for awhile, before he could be sure Judith wasn't just leading him by the nose.

"'Tis time to go," William said, approaching the two of them. "We don't want to get mother angry again for being late."

By the time they arrived back home Mary was indeed waiting for them, watching from behind the latticed windows that let in a bit of a draft at the front of the house. When she saw her children approach at last she counted the heads of each of them to make sure they were all there, and then she struggled with how to welcome her children back home. On the one hand, she wanted to run out and greet them and embrace them all for returning to her alive and healthy. On the other hand, she wanted to yell at them for being gone so long, for taking little Anne with them yet again when obviously she was too young to be out in the sun all afternoon, and for not seeming to care how much their absence worried their mother. Mary loved her children, but she'd had no idea before becoming a mother how much they would worry her too.

The door opened with a creak like split wood and William spoke first. "Mother, you should see our new play. Gilbert plays an old king brilliantly and Joan is superb as a stupid, irresponsible queen." William and Joan glanced at each other and broke out in grins. "I have a hard time remembering all the things I'm supposed to say, but I get to brandish a sword in the second act and I've been perfecting my swordfight for weeks." William struck a combative pose. "See now, when I step forward with my right foot, I can stab good with my right hand. But I'm left handed so it doesn't feel right. Now, if I step forward with my left foot, and stab with my left hand, it goes much better. See?" Mary watched her son prance around the room aggressively stabbing the air. When he finally stopped she looked into the face of her bursting child and wondered where he got all his energy. Was she ever this happy, she wondered, when she was a child?

"Go inside and study your Latin," she commended. With a sigh, William turned and went upstairs.

Judith stepped inside and tried to head up the stairs after her brother, but her mother stopped her. "We need more wood," she told her, "and when you're done fetching that you can help with the laundry."

Without a word Judith handed the props in her hands to her sister, brushed the dirt off her skirts, and headed out towards the back of the house to the wood pile. She brought in two heavy

armloads and set them carefully by the hearth. Then she went behind the garden, where the large black laundry pot steamed with hot water. Judith picked up the wooden paddle her mother had abandoned a few minutes earlier and stirred the clothes in the hot, lye-filled water. Immediately, she felt the ache of it in her shoulders and back.

It had been a beautiful day. The orange-tinged summer sun had been hot all afternoon, but the heat had been tempered with a cool breeze and a scatter of clouds that broke up the bright sky. Judith looked out over the horizon, at the green rolling hills of Warwick and the graying thatched rooftops of her neighbors and watched as two vultures circled the air in a kind of dance, dipping low and then climbing high, and then dipping low all over again. She knew they were searching for kill, seeking out food and sniffing for blood, but from a distance it looked like a game, like they were engaged in a graceful, perpetual courtship with the winds.

Shifting from her right to her left foot, a flicker of resentment passed through Judith at again being given the hardest work in the house. But then it passed. Judith stared into the hot, dark water of the pot and began making up a new story in her head. It opened with a scene of witches, faces long and noses hooked, hair all about in a tangled jumble, stirring a pot of potion and casting fortunes. *Double, double, toil and trouble...fire burn and cauldron bubble...scale of dragon, tooth of wolf...witches' mummy, maw and gulf.* Judith giggled to herself, wondering what indeed witches put into their potions.

Mary came out then and sat on a stool, watching her daughter work. Her feet ached and her hands were tired from kneading dough earlier in the afternoon and she couldn't help but wonder with annoyance why Judith looked so lost, as if in another world. If she wasn't playing games, her eldest daughter couldn't seem to concentrate on anything. Mary sighed audibly while taking in Judith's dirty skirts and tousled appearance and thought, if only she took care of herself better she could be so pretty. With that lovely ivory skin and fine yellow hair, if only she would protect them from the sun like I ask her to. Mary again regretted that she'd allowed Judith to spend the entire afternoon traipsing about in the forest, getting her kirtle dirty and play-acting with a bunch

of children. She sized up her daughter's well-proportioned figure and confirmed again that she shouldn't be doing that, not at her age. Judith was past sixteen years and almost a woman now.

Mary cleared her throat. "Is your sampler finished yet?"

Judith looked up and focused her thoughts on the needlework. Most nights after supper, as the family gathered around the hearth, Judith was increasingly expected to say nothing and concentrate on her needlework. Right now she was completing a border, a pattern of birds and flowers that her mother had earlier passed on to her, but she didn't like how it was turning out. The beak on the hummingbird was far too long, and the flowers had somehow bunched together, as if they were huddling together for support from some collective fear. It always distressed Judith a little to have to pick up the sampler at night and assess again her embroidery skills, because in all honesty, whether her mother chose to admit it or not, she simply wasn't very good at stitching.

"I'll work on it after supper," Judith suggested.

"You need to spend more time on it than you do. It takes years to put together a good trousseau, and right now yours has very few things in it." Mary said this believing that both she, and her daughter, regularly thought about Judith's eventual wedding day.

Judith paused again from her work. When she thought about getting married she imagined a warm day, lots of flowers in bloom and birds in the air, a fun march through town with the musicians and children throwing coins after her. A few years ago Judith had made up a story that included a wedding procession - the only problem had been when they tried to act it out Joan and Gilbert kept getting distracted, laughing and tripping over each other and not taking the thing seriously at all. They had simply been too young. Judith had given up on that play, but now she thought about bringing it back. Joan and Gilbert were older now and it would be fun to stage another mock wedding.

"What color shall your wedding gown be?" Mary asked, following her own internal train of thought.

"What color do you prefer?" Judith inquired, trying to give the choice to her mother like a gift.

"By my life child, 'tis your wedding. You should have a preference."

Judith tried to recall what color her mother had told her her own wedding gown had been. She thought that if she picked the same color as her mother had, it would make her happy. But she simply could not remember what her mother had chosen. “Yellow?”

Yellow? Didn’t the girl realize that a light color would wash out her face and hair? Red would contrast much better. If I suggested she wear a veil, Mary thought, I imagine she’d go along with that, even though no one wears veils anymore.

By her mother’s silence Judith knew she had chosen wrong. She wanted to please her mother, she just seemed to keep messing up with her more and more instead. “How about a veil? Shall I wear a veil on my wedding day?”

Mary let out a tick of exasperation. How could she make her daughter understand the importance of her own wedding? Everyone knew that the path to true happiness was a good, sound marriage, but her daughter didn’t seem to care about such things at all. All her daughter cared about were stories, plays, and childish games - nothing that would lead to a good man or a good marriage. Mary sighed and looked upwards. By heaven, what did God have in store for this daughter of hers, and when would He make it plain?

Mary eventually stood up to go into the house. Before turning around she glanced again at her eldest daughter. “You must needs keep your cap on when you go out into the forest, Judith. Otherwise your hair gets loose and unruly.”

Judith nodded solemnly. “Yes, mother.”

By the time Judith had finished rinsing, squeezing, and hanging the laundry to dry, supper was ready. She entered the house rubbing her chapped, raw hands and joined her family at the table. William and Gilbert had already begun a game of Word Make-Up when Judith sat down on the bench across from them. Mary was busy dishing out portions of steaming meat pie to their father at the other end of the table.

“Marigoistic,” William whispered, giving Gilbert a challenging look.

Gilbert rolled his eyes and Joan, sitting beside Judith, couldn’t help but let out a soft groan. It was an easy one, just the flower

marigold turned into a description. William had a soft spot for flowers, trees and birds. He loved the outdoors and was always making up words based on the beautiful things he found there. The only problem was that, by now, everyone knew it. And of course, with a smug expression on his face, Gilbert immediately offered as a definition, “A person who is marigoistic is warm, golden, and in full bloom, like a flower.”

“Ach, too easy,” Joan ruled, her mouth full of food. She never felt much compunction about stating her opinions, handing them out at the supper table like passing driftwood. “You should be more creative when William favors you with an easy one.” Gilbert pouted and everyone quieted down as their father glanced in their direction.

John Shakespeare had dark brown eyes and light brown hair, the color of which blended seamlessly into his earth brown jerkin and dirty white smock. His hands were rough and permanently streaked with tannin but his smooth face, generally graced with a smile, belied the hard life his callused hands implied. Judith looked at her father as she chewed her food and wondered what he thought about all day as he boiled pigskin and hammered leather into flat, malleable shapes. She wanted to ask him what his days were like, so she could use the information in a future story, but she knew better than to speak up at the supper table.

“Irappy,” Gilbert whispered a few minutes later, now that it was his turn to make up a word. It never took Gilbert long to come up with a word because in the summertime, when the weather was hot and it was difficult to sleep at night, he passed the time lying in bed making up as many words as he could. William, Gilbert noted competitively, always took longer to come up with his words.

William recognized the Latin in the prefix to the word and immediately thought of the obvious definition - irate and happy put together, a feeling of mixed anger and joy. He hesitated in giving out this answer though, because while it was at least as good as Gilbert’s last one, he knew he could do better. Besides, Joan was being particularly judgmental over the obvious answers that evening, so William felt he had to take his time and think harder. His brow creased and he played with his food while he

tried to come up with something smart, yet witty, something that would make his sister proud.

“Finish your stew,” Mary admonished, noticing how little William had eaten. Cocking her head to the side she asked, “Are you two playing that word game again?”

William and Gilbert looked down into their laps while Judith stole a quick glance at their father. He was draining his mug of ale, seemingly oblivious to the drama unfolding around him. Mary reminded her children how God had worked to provide them with food. How their Creator was munificent and kind and should not be taken for granted. John eventually put his bread down on the table, turned to his sons and asked, “What ’tis the word?”

At first, no one replied, so John asked the question again.

“Irappy,” Gilbert admitted. “I gave it to William.”

William met his father’s eyes and at that moment it came to him. “The look in a thirsty dog’s eye when you give him a fresh bowl of milk - that’s irappy.”

Joan let out a squeal of delight before clapping her hands over her mouth. Judith nodded in approval. Their father guffawed with pleasure and William blushed a light pink, knowing he had done well. Mary, annoyed at the lack of discipline around her table but not wanting to contradict her husband’s enjoyment of it, got up and went to bring over a bowl of fruit from the sideboard. A subdued Gilbert sat still in his chair. He hated being bested. He took a breath and was about to say something, to argue a point, when Anne let out a loud, rasping cough. The family watched as her whole body shook with the effort.

“’Tis- ’tis fine,” she struggled ineffectively to say. Anne had always been a fragile girl, taking extra naps during the day and never being able to play in the forest quite as long as her older siblings, but she had never been worrisomely sick, and she had certainly never had a coughing fit like this one before. It gathered strength until, with a pop, a thick globule of blood flew out of her mouth and landed with a splash in the middle of the table. For a minute, everyone just stared at it.

Mary was the first to react, jumping to her daughter’s side and grabbing her head in her hands, searching Anne’s eyes for the illness within. Judith rushed to find a handkerchief while Joan

held on to her sister's hand and pressed its cool palm between her own. Anne had a confused expression on her face, surprised as anyone about what had just happened. She knew she had been feeling extra tired lately, and chilled even in the middle of a hot afternoon, but it had never seemed all that important.

Mary grunted as she lifted Anne up in her arms and carried her to the box chair by the hearth. It was the chair that Mary had comforted all the Shakespeare children in when they were first born, and through all their childhood illnesses. Its brown seat was worn smooth and round and its arms were covered in nicks and scratches where all the children had, at some point, dug their nails and teeth into it.

Mary held her daughter to her chest, patted her back, and cooed into her ear. After a few minutes Anne's frail body relaxed. She looked about her and smiled, sinking into her mother's embrace. Joan took a seat on the floor at her mother's feet and the rest of the family gathered together around them. Anne seemed fine and there was no longer any evidence of blood or coughing, but the mood in the room was no longer joyful; the word game had ended and no one seemed to know what to do with themselves. Judith wished she could tell a story, something to distract everybody's mind and maybe make them all smile, but she knew her mother would not approve. Their father stood off to the side, picking dirt from beneath his fingernails with the tip of a knife.

A heavy knock at the front door broke the silence and made everyone but Anne jump as if they'd been hit with a poker. Mary looked inquisitively at her husband who lifted his shoulders as if he had no idea who it might be. In truth, his gut told him that it was Langrake, come to collect the money from the illegal wool trade the week before. Unbeknownst to his family John had begun brogging, and in the last few months the business had grown out of his control. He hadn't meant to enter the underground wool trading business, it had all started as a one-time favor to Mary's rich uncle Edward who asked him, innocently enough, to drop off a tod on one of his trips to Coventry. But when John handed off the wool and collected the heavy sack of gold in return, the weight of it told him that something was wrong. He let it bounce a few

times in his hand and calculated that the pouch must contain over two hundred pounds of coin, but before he could stop the toothless merchant to let him know that a mistake had been made, the man was gone and the realization of what had happened settled on John's shoulders. When Edward asked him a month later to make the trade again, John, to his own surprise, consented. Thinking back on it, John had justified the transaction as merely his due. He considered the span of his life and proudly saw his rise from lowly country farmer to successful town glover. He had married well, into a family that could trace its lineage back to the Domesday Book of William the Conqueror, and had then made his way through a succession of important municipal positions from ale-taster to constable to chamberlain to bailiff, and now even alderman. Taken together, it all seemed a natural progression. And now John was being given the opportunity to make the kind of money that fit his ambitions. He couldn't deny that he enjoyed spending the coin the wool trades brought in. He could afford all manner of things now that, without asking where they came from, even Mary enjoyed. But when the heavy knock rang out again at the front door, John could not help but fear that the day of reckoning had arrived. His wife was always saying that God kept a tally, and he was sure that the paymaster had come at last.

"Shall I get it?" William asked. John shook his head and lifted himself heavily from the wall. He went to the front door and pulled it open to find a flurry of scarlet red cloaks and crimson velvet liveries. He jumped when a trumpet rang out loud and clear off to his right. John smiled then, his fears dissolving into self-righteous appraisal. He was the chief alderman of Stratford-upon-Avon and another group of traveling players had come to his door seeking permission to perform. It was one of John's favorite responsibilities as alderman of Stratford, to approve any acting troupe that came to town and asked for permission to put on a performance. It was merely a formality, of course, as he would never turn down a request from a powerful patron, and this time it appeared to be the Earl of Worcester's Men who had made their way to town, but John dutifully inspected the players' letters and listened to the list of titles the troupe was ready to put on. John considered pretending to turn the players down, just to tease his

children whom he knew were listening in the hall behind him, but he was too relieved that the knock at the door wasn't Langrake that he had nothing but gratitude for anyone who faced him. He offered generous terms to the players' manager, shook his hand, and then agreed to a first performance in the guildhall on the morrow.

As John closed the door and faced his family, he could still hear the bells on the players' girtles clinking and chiming as they made their way down the street. Judith and William were standing upright against the back wall, Judith's hands clasped together, William seeming not to breathe. Gilbert and Joan were smiling too, but it was the look of irappiness radiating from Anne's face that gave John the most pleasure. "Alas," he asked, "who would like to see a play tomorrow?"