

Nick Morrish – Innocent Lamb

My name is Lorenzo Bassano. I am a minstrel, an Italian and a Jew which tells you everything about me and nothing. Perhaps you already suppose I bear false witness; I would expect nothing less.

Throughout Europe, the Jew is treated with suspicion. In the melting pot of Venice, we were tolerated as long as we professed ourselves Catholic Jews. Here in England, under Elizabeth's zealous reign, we make it known that we are loyal, Protestant Jews.

My mother was English, kind in spirit as are the best of her race. My father was a Venetian, a Sephardic Jew and a fine musician, whose ancestors hailed from Iberia. My acquaintance, Mr William Shakespeare writes verses to Emilia, calling her his 'black beauty', but in truth she has more of her mother's complexion. I, on the other hand, am unmistakably a scion of the sun-baked Mediterranean.

Of these two disadvantages, my religion counts most against me here and offers most danger to my career and my well-being. To be a Jew here is death, whereas my dark skin and crow-black hair is but a curiosity to most. Emilia, of course, is feted as an exotic beauty and dresses as she imagines might an Iberian princess.

Excepting my sister's feminine charms, our main support in difficult times is our music. I named myself minstrel but I am a true musician and my sister something greater still. There are none to match her playing upon the virginal and she has a gathering reputation as a poetess, a musician and a mistress. Which of these fames shall endure the longest, I know not.

On the strength of Emilia's reputation, we were invited to Place House in the county of Hampshire. Once an Abbey, it is now the home of Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, Mr Shakespeare's patron and friend.

Emilia was delighted to hear that William was also in attendance. His commission: a play to honour the visit of Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, the

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Queen's spymaster-general and a man known to attend the theatre almost as often as he did the public gallows.

In preparation for the visit, a preview of this new drama, entitled 'Truth Will Out' was to be presented by some of Lord Strange's players. Through my sister's good offices, I was offered a significant part in the proceedings and I read the script with great interest.

His premise for the piece was most unusual; you might say it was a tragedy turned upon its head. He would present the audience with the death of a woman. Foul murder has been perpetrated upon her: by whom it is not known. By means of signs, cunningly revealed, the audience is invited to deduce the identity of the killer. In the final act, the characters over whom suspicion hangs are brought together and a revelation of guilt is made, to the surprise of all.

I was to play the itinerant Jew, Shelach, who finds the body and upon whom suspicion naturally falls. No great imagination was required to place myself in the role of this unjustly accused fellow.

My Lord Strange's boy, Adam Gaunt was the tragic victim, Rachel and his cousin, Edward Langstone the temptress, Judith. In my humble opinion, Langstone was far too old to be a boy player but his piping voice and slight figure gifted him the older female roles. He had a casual attitude towards his betters; referring to the Lords Southampton and Strange as 'dear Henry' and 'old Fernando'. Nevertheless, he knew his lines and delivered them in a convincingly feminine fashion.

That evening, we presented the play in the Great Hall. The audience numbered only a few dozen of Lord Southampton's trusted friends and acquaintances, but our troupe could not have asked for a more discerning crowd. And so the play began...

All is dark upon the stage. Behind a screen an altercation occurs, then a piercing cry and the sound of heavy footsteps hastening from the scene. I

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enter stage left carrying a lantern and by its light observe a bloody knife upon the ground. I pick it up and stare in horror. 'What means this foul object,' I cry and cast about for some explanation. I sweep aside the screen and there upon the bed lies the body of Rachel, a young maiden, stained with her own life's blood.

'Oh horror, oh horror,' I wail, but before I can raise the alarm, two noblemen enter. Seeing me there with dagger in hand and the lady slain, they mistake me for the villain. In vain, I protest my innocence. The younger man, full of righteous anger, is set to run me through even as I fall on my knees and beg for mercy. Fortunately, older and calmer counsel prevails and I am hauled off to face their master.

And so the play progressed with great direction, whilst 'Rachel' lay upon the bed in perfect imitation of a corpse. I recall admiring Adam's stoicism and shudder to think of it now.

It was not until the completion of the first act, when servants came to remove the bed that they discovered Adam murdered, in exact simulation of the play. He must have been stabbed through the heart with the very weapon Shelach held not half an hour before and his blood was on my hands for all to see.

I went straightways to the kitchens to wash away the filth and, though there was surely no more blood on me I felt unclean. I feel so even now.

Now, I could see full well which way the wind would blow and considered fleeing the house forthwith but I delayed too long and was seized by officers of the Watch. They locked me in a secure cellar, surrounded by abandoned relics of the old Abbey and left me there to contemplate my fate. It was as I expected; the black Jew with bloody hands. Who else should be blamed?

In vain did Emilia protest my innocence. Poor, sweet Lorenzo! Why should he have killed the boy? What possible motive could there be?

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The moral turpitude of actors, foreigners and Jews is well known to the ill-educated and close-minded, to which category I consign the Watchmen of Hampshire. It was even suggested that I had designs of an unpleasant lascivious nature upon the boy; that he rejected me and in a fit of jealousy I had slain him.

Why I should choose to advertise my guilt in such a public manner was not known but the ways of foreigners are beyond the understanding of simple, honest English folk.

With nothing to do but indulge in idle speculation, I considered the victim. Could it be some personal quality caused his untimely death? For sure, it was not uncommon for a troupe of actors to have a catamite amongst their ranks, but I did not believe it of Adam.

I have heard it whispered that our host, Lord Southampton prefers the company of men. This is oft said with a wink and a knowing look. And what of Mr Shakespeare, the glover's son who abandons his wife to associate with a peer of the realm. In my opinion it is nothing but common jealousy, for William's pursuit of Emilia is by no means feigned. For proof, I offer up his heartfelt poetry. Of course he also praises his patron in verse but I do not confuse affection with passion.

Yet do they not say that nine tenths of violence results from men's passions (and the last tenth from their fears)? And how else should a young lad with no grievous faults of character earn a man's mortal enmity? Did he see what he should not? Or was his playing his undoing? In our production, he was 'Rachel', who's name in the Hebrew tongue means 'Innocent Lamb'. For what greedy cause could this innocent have been sacrificed?

I was not left to my musings for long. First came William, full of good humour as ever, calling through a crack in the cellar door.

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'Fear not, Lorenzo,' he cried. 'This is simply a play within a play. Poor Adam! T'was a tragedy for him, but shall not be so for you. This is merely the first act! Remember your lines, Lorenzo and all will be well.'

'Tell me what to say, William,' I required of him, 'My mind is addled with fear and I cannot remember. Prompt me, Will.'

'Think on to the final act,' he urged. 'Shelach is led away to the scaffold but the good Doctor Walter outstrips the execution party. His words may save the condemned man. What does he say, Lorenzo? What sweet grace pours from his mouth?'

I closed my eyes and quietly recited the Doctor's pretty speech. I have no great memory for lines but William's words are more like to music than those of other poets. My solitary audience applauded and walked away whistling to himself.

Scarcely had I gathered my wits, when soldiers of the Wriothesley's own regiment arrived with keys and a mission they seemed eager to complete in haste.

'You are to be questioned,' announced their commander, as two of his fellows seized me by the arms. 'Be truthful and all will be well.'

There was a lie for sure. A man who suffers the kind of questioning that is customary these days may never be well again. As I was dragged through the dark tunnels beneath the old Abbey, I expected at any moment to arrive at some fearful chamber of interrogation. Instead I was led up a disused stairway to a sparsely furnished room overlooking the cloisters. There was nought inside but an old tapestry, a desk and a single moth-eaten chair. And in the chair sat none other than Henry Wriothesley himself.

'Leave us!' he ordered and dismissed the reluctant Watchmen with an imperious wave of his hand.

I stood in silence for what seemed an age. Not for a second did his gaze leave mine. Finally, he seemed to come to a decision.

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'You seem anxious, Lorenzo Bassano,' he suggest in a soft voice.

'Yes my Lord, they said I was to be questioned.'

'And you thought the questions to come with barbs and brands, I suppose.'

'Yes, my Lord,'

'Should I torture you then?' he demanded ominously. 'Shall I rack you for a confession? They say it loosens men's tongues most wonderfully.'

'Then I will confess,' I asserted. 'But so would any man: guilty or innocent. Pain eradicates such subtle distinctions.'

'And to what would you confess, Bassano?'

'Usury, cowardice, fornication...'

'But not murder?'

'That too, my Lord, if you will it,' I offered. 'But it would not be the truth.'

'The truth is such a troublesome conceit. How much easier it would be for all concerned, if I were to simply hang you in the morning. But then the beautiful Emilia would never speak to me again and I should never know what truly happened. Are you sure you did not kill Master Adam?'

'No my, Lord. Though my hands are red, I did not do it. Nor do I know who did.'

'Nor I,' confided Wriothsesley. 'But I believe I know who ordered his death. And therein lies the problem. I am less concerned as to who killed the boy, as why. Too much curiosity on that subject could prove ruinous to us all.'

Presently, Wriothsesley rose from his chair and handed me a small sack of vittles.

'If you are still hungry, the kitchens are below and you are expected,' he assured me. 'If you venture further, it is at your own risk. I cannot hazard more than I already have.'

'For that I thank you, my Lord.'

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‘One more thing,’ Wriothsesley paused and pulled out a small bottle from under his cloak. ‘My father claimed he would rather fall on his sword than face the gallows. I fear that is a harder feat than it sounds. I have no stomach for such Roman bravado, therefore, I carry this excellent potion. I cannot promise it is painless but I am told it is exceedingly quick.’

He handed me the bottle and on that unsettling note, strode from the room.

For a long while I sat in the tattered chair considering his lethal flask and his words. Henry Wriothsesley had long tied his fortunes to those of Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, a great favourite of the Queen. But lately Essex had become restless and the Queen more critical of his failed campaigns abroad.

There were many who relished the chance to bring down Essex and his followers. Chief amongst them was Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, who was even now riding towards Place House. There was little doubt who Wriothsesley thought guilty of inciting murder, but the why of it puzzled me somewhat.

Cecil was a brutal man, not known for half measures. If he wanted to send a harbinger of ruin, why kill a poor actor. With a wave of his quill, he could order a dozen men to the rack. Not for nothing did Wriothsesley carry a bottle of poison about his person. There are many worse ways to die.

I recalled again the Doctor's lines from ‘Truth Will Out’:

‘There are many causes that place murder in a man's heart but chief amongst them is love. Intemperate love that devours the heart. Love which is but hatred in apish guise...’

But who loved Henry Wriothsesley so much, save the man himself? Who had so much hatred as to kill one stranger and frame another?

Love or treachery? Now I had two causes: but suppose both were true? There was only one victim yet and perforce only one murderer. If I

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could combine these two disparate motives into one person, I should have my man.

There was precious little time. Soon Robert Cecil would be banging on the gates and all reason and justice would leave this place. I needed to find the one person I trusted unreservedly.

I found Emilia by following the melancholic sound of the virginal echoing down the dark stone passageway. Startled to see me released, she froze and the music faded away to silence. I quickly motioned her to continue and she struck up a stately pavane as I explained my strategy.

She quickly agreed to fill the role I required of her and continued the refrain, whilst I scurried away to the room assigned to our theatrical properties. My luck held; there was no one to be seen and I searched the dress boxes for a suitable costume. An abbot's outfit seemed apposite and fitted neatly over my cellar-stained clothes. All that remained was to prepare a murder scene for our little shadow play and await Emilia with the principal players.

First to arrive was Wriothsesley. He raised a speculative eyebrow at my wholly inadequate disguise then found a chair in a darkened corner of the room, where he could observe without being observed. I pulled the hood over my face and drew the blinds until all was suitably dismal.

Next came Emilia who took up her allotted station and smiled reassuringly, despite her frightful costume. A while later came William leading his entire uneasy company, who stared at the prospect before them: the fateful bed and the body laid upon it.

'Why does Adam lie here still, all bloody and unburied' complained John Kempe, Strange's leading man. 'It is not Christian to leave the boy so.'

'None will touch him,' explained William, shaking his head regretfully. 'The servants say there's a spirit about which cries for vengeance if any should approach his corpse.'

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‘Poppycock,’ countered Kempe. ‘I will move him myself if those superstitious fools will not.’

‘Don’t touch him, John,’ cried one of his fellows in agitation. ‘You’ll curse us all.’

‘I swear I saw those sheets move,’ declared another.

Indeed it did appear that the victim was stirring. There was a general movement towards the door but two soldiers barred the way.

‘I have brought a priest,’ William declared, improvising splendidly. ‘So that we may drive out this spirit and lay poor Adam to rest. But I warn you: this procedure is not without risk. If any man had a hand in this death, their soul is surely in mortal peril.’

I made my way to the bedside clutching a volume in Latin called *De Re Coquinaria* which I found amongst the props and began reciting the ancient instructions as though they were a benediction. My Latin is somewhat limited but I believe it was in truth a recipe for boiled veal.

Nevertheless, it had the desired effect. Several of the company crossed themselves furtively and all were transfixed on the scene before them. At a suitable dramatic moment, I made a sign over the bed and placed my hand upon the corpse.

Immediately, the bloody figure sat up and stared blankly through a waxen death-mask at the shocked onlookers. Like a blind man, it groped around the bedcovers until it found the fatal knife, pointing at each of the company in turn.

‘Who of you did this?’ it hissed. ‘Confess, maggot! I shall not rest until I have ripped your soul from your body with this self-same knife!’

At that point, an elderly and sensitive fellow fainted dead away. Another turned deathly pale and sank to his knees before me clutching my cloak, begging: ‘Save me Father! Suffer not the Devil to take my soul.’

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It was Edward Langstone, sweat-streaked white paint still on his face and scarcely recognisable in men's attire. I averted my face, as the figure on the bed wailed and cursed the quaking boy.

'Was this your doing, my son?' I asked him gently. 'Do you confess it? I cannot protect you otherwise.'

'Yes, yes, Father!' he sobbed. 'I confess it. I did it for *him*, for all our sakes. The Lord will forgive me: he knows my true heart.' He waved his hand at the still animated corpse, now showing signs of losing the will to be undead. 'This is the Devil's work. Cast out this evil, Father. Make it stop. I cannot bear to look upon that *thing*.'

At this final slight, Emilia threw off the mask and glared at Langstone. Then with deadly intent, she hurled the knife.

On the turn of a coin do our fortunes daily depend. Heads or tails? Handle or blade? My sister is a poor shot by any measure. Her throw missed Langstone by several feet and found my ribs instead: dull end first, praise the Lord. Winded I staggered away from the boy, who could now see me for what I was.

He still shook but now it was with fury not fear.

'Deceiver! Perfidious Jew! How dare you act the priest? Devil's work indeed!'

Wriothesley rose from the shadows and strode across the room to face him.

'It is you, methinks, who works for a devil,' he suggested. 'Do you deny that you are one of Robert Cecil's spies?'

Langstone stared at him as if under some enchantment.

'My lord, forgive me.' he beseeched. 'It is true: I am paid to keep watch upon your court and upon others of your acquaintance, but I could never betray you, my lord.'

Wriothesley looked more closely at him.

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‘How should I know you?’ he demanded.

‘My mother was in your father’s employ as a nursemaid. She cared for you as a child. I saw you often in my youth but I think you did not see me. Or if you did it was as a tapestry or painting that one passes everyday and cannot later recall its form.’

‘So you repay the father’s generosity by spying upon the son.’

‘And by warning him.’

‘It is customary to convey warnings with a pen,’ Wriothesley suggested sarcastically. ‘What kind of a man scribes them into flesh with a knife?’

‘Please hear me, my Lord. Your benefactor, the Earl of Essex plots sedition and soon will be in open revolt against the Queen. It is folly of the most dangerous type. He cannot succeed. If you join with him a slow and painful death awaits you. The Earl of Salisbury approaches. I beg you: go to him at once and swear allegiance. Only he can protect you.’

‘And shall I present him with a treacherous spy unmasked?’ sneered Wriothesley.

‘No, my Lord that is not how this play must end. If you offer him a murdering Jew, caught in the act, your welcome is assured. If you hand him his own man, disgraced, then all your words are tainted with suspicion.’

‘And what of the Jew? Is he to be sacrificed?’

‘For your own safety, my Lord, all things may be sacrificed. After all, he is only a Jew.’

Emilia made another attempt to strike the man. William caught her arm and turned to face Langstone.

‘Hath not a Jew eyes?’ he declaimed. ‘Hath not a Jew hands, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, warmed by the same summers, as a Christian is?’

I did not recognize the speech but supposed I would hear its like again soon enough. As for Langstone, he stared at William as though he were mad.

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‘There will be no more sacrifices here,’ declared Wriothesley. ‘No more innocent lambs to the slaughter. Take this man away. I do not wish to see his face again. As for Salisbury, he is to be our guest and shall be treated as such. I will not present him with any cause to think ill of me. He shall be royally entertained but not by this play I think: there is too much blood in it, William.’

‘I have another, all set in midsummer,’ William assured him. ‘It is full of fairies and lovers lost in the woods. All live happily thereafter.’

‘Then it will do most admirably.’

Involved as they were in discourse, no one observed me as I approached the prisoner. Even the Watch made no attempt to stop me as I accosted Langstone and punched him full in the face.

‘Hath a Jew not fists?’ I enquired rhetorically as he clutched his bleeding nose. Nor did anyone in the confusion see my other hand which, with a musician’s dexterity, slipped a small bottle into the murderer’s pocket.

I have no more stomach for torture than my Lord Southampton and moreover there are many things said between players which should not be repeated to the world. I am not a vindictive man, but I had little aversion to curtailing this poor player’s hour on the stage.

It is now some five years since these events occurred and many things have come to pass. The Earl of Essex is dead and Henry Wriothesley is resident in the Tower. His freedom is forfeit but he still lives and I am satisfied with my part in that.

Emilia has a child whose imminent arrival persuaded her to marriage. I see her often, though her husband is a bore whose company I avoid like the plague. William returned to London and continues to write to great acclaim.

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'Truth Will Out' was never performed again to my knowledge, though William is not one to waste such fine prose. For my part, I declined his offer to play Shelach's unappealing Venetian counterpart and have rather devoted my energies to assisting those who find themselves similarly pressed by injustice.

Nevertheless, I have not given up the stage entirely. William says that he has just the part for me: an ailing King of France healed by a woman's hand. It sounds a fine play and he assures me that all will end well.