

You're here because of my husband, aren't you? Strange folk in Stratford? Send them to Anne Shakespeare, she'll know what to do with them. And I'm left to sort Will's friends from common vagabonds - which is no simple thing let me tell you. Master Jonson just gone had his thumb pricked for murder, though he seemed a learned man, I'll grant him that. If I listened to my brother I'd shoo you all off. He thinks I'm the only Shakespeare in Stratford worth the visit. But that's Bartholomew. He never did like my match. But Will at eighteen! Those dark curls of his. Gone now, of course, but then... They sent shivers down my spine. A strange boy, though. What went through his head! Mind you, what went through mine.

Anne is sprawled on the bed, caressing her pillow as if it was her lover.

Will!

You must not think I love him. Not Will Shakespeare. I tell you now, that is heresy.

Not that I hate him. I don't. But he do talk nonsense. An instance.

Your eyes are now my noon-day sun.
Where's the sense in that? He won't be in darkness if I close them.

Maybe that's not such nonsense after all. I shut my eyes to prove it and Lord knows what his hands will get up to. He can plot on. I'll not even give him a kiss. No. Not where folk will see us.

He can love my eyes though. I don't mind that. Love them all he wants - they are very blue - but to call them his sun... When I run my hand through his curls, I don't use ten words when one will do. No, I call them curls and have done with it. Waste is wrong, even if it's only words. Every Hathaway knows that. Which is why Stratford respects us.

If Will thinks world should be different, my sympathy, but dogs won't stop their barking because it's him that's telling them.

I want something more solid from a lad than a poem. Don't none of you smirk at that. You know my meaning well enough. All know what they say about a man of words.

A man of words but not of deeds
Is like a garden full of weeds

The man I wed must be worth my loving. He'll be my rock and I'll be his. I won't have him tedious, mind. I hate tedious men. A long life's all very well, but I don't want it seeming long. But it won't. Not with the man I'll choose. Folk will envy us because our love won't grow old, not even when we do. And we'll have a sheaf of babies.

You know what he said to that? 'We will. Half boys, half girls.' As if they'd be his babies.

I'm not saying I don't like him. Sometimes his words float me away and I'm a bird flying high over Stratford and down below are these tiny little folk going about their tiny little business. But those tiny folk - we're two of them. And in their world love is a bargain. The wife do her work and the husband his. But what work will he do? It might be a Hathaway question but it needs his answer. He can't learn a trade when his father has no money to prentice him.

Not that I need fret. He'll not wed me, not if I was the fairest of them all - not that I'd agree to it any road. But if I would, it will not happen. He's too young to pledge without consent and his father won't grant that, not for me. John Shakespeare would be a gentleman. He may be higher than a Hathaway, but that's a long road off being gentry. We're content with who we are. Let him be the same. Leastways, we're not ruined.

If I say that round Will, his face... He can sulk, but Stratford knows it for a fact. Don't think I mislike Master Shakespeare. The contrary - he's a merry man and once he helped my father. But he is ruined.

Any road Will's too young for me. Eight years too young. What do I want with a boy? Though old enough is age enough. If I wanted him.

He wants me though. He says I'm not a girl with more feather than brain. I know my mind. Which I do. He says he loves me for that. It means I'm not tedious. To hear him say that is worth all his poetry. But if we're a match on that, it won't sway his father, not one inch. I'm not gentle enough. He may be ruined, but he's still proud on that score. I'd say overproud, for where he is. If my brother squeezed him for what he owes us, he'd consent soon enough - he'd have no choice. But that's wishing for harvest at Christmas. Bartholomew likes the match no better. He thinks Will is straw. He has his own rock in mind for me. Rock? John Smith's more like a boulder, he's so weighed down with his own good opinion. Bartholomew can

wish. Hathaways have a mind of their own. I'll court who I choose and I don't choose Bartholomew's ponderous friends. But how can I choose Will? Even if I wished it. And I'm not saying I do.

Though I do like him. He thinks different. Which makes him no rock - I've not forgot that. But when he words me...

He says I've lips like Indian coral. Has he ever seen Indian coral, do you think? I hope it is not some horrid orange. Or purple - that would be worse.

My cheeks - they are like the damask rose. Though roses have thorns. I don't want him scratched. I know he calls it poetry, but words mean what they mean.

My breasts - he can stop right there. I'm not having him think of those. Though I'm sure he do. And more than that. Tush, girl, you truly think it's your mind he wants? Be straight - folk do call me headstrong. A boy can take a meaning from that. If that's his thought, he'd best think again. He's not getting there - nowhere near.

It must be words between us. And a little kissing won't be harm. But nothing more. However much we want it. Not even if he asks. Though pray God he don't. For if he does...

God, what shall I do?

Don't tell me wait 'til he's of age. It's not so easy. That will be three years, nigh on. A boy won't wait that long. And I can't. If I'm not pledged by next year, who'll have me, if he don't? I want babies. God, I know it's hard, even for you, but can't you find a way?

You'll say forget him. Why not? He can't leave me, if I've left him. It's not as if it's him, John Smith or no-one. There's plenty more trout in the river. I'll go tickle for one. Why, there's...

She runs through the list in her head, dismissing each one.

There must be someone I like.

This isn't justice, God. My father left me this bed for my use. A bed for two. Why can't I share it with the man I want?

Because I'm not pledged to who I want, that's why. And who'll our witness with him under age?

Can't you be our witness, God? They can't deny you. Except Bartholomew will say you told him different like he always does.

Let's settle this now. Whatever comes out, I'll bide by. That's a promise, God. Now, you do your part.

She takes off her shoes

I know it's popish now, but all the same...

She crosses herself.

Here's to it then.

Cross my shoes into a T
My true love's face I'll see.

She crosses her shoes and sits on the bed, eyes shut, hands in her lap, waiting for her vision.

Will Shakespeare!

She rolls back onto the bed, tosses the pillow up in the air and embraces it as she catches it.

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A curse on those shoes. They've given me a baby.

I knew it was folly but the devil kept saying you want to, Anne, and it's true, I did. So I did it. I thought it wouldn't matter if I was on top.

He needn't look so pleased with himself. Bartholomew will drive him to the church with a pitchfork. He won't miss the chance to jab him neither, not now Will's upset his plans. And there's no use Will looking to his father for rescue. He daren't deny me now, or he'll have his debts called in. Will must marry me or leave Stratford.

He says he'll marry - it's what he wants. I want it too, of course I do, but he do build castles out of nothing. Maybe he's talked himself into love. I'm a woman. I'll lose my temper, feel merry when he wants to be sad, and feel sad when he wants to be merry. But every morning for the rest of our lives, he'll wake to me. Can he do that? Every chatterpie in Stratford will be saying I trapped him. Let them, I say, but if he thought it... I'd rather drudge than see that in his face.