

A Princess of Bohemia
or “The Midwife’s Tale”
A Play in two Acts

“Kindness repaid is rare enough, kindness unearned still rarer.”

Dramatis Personae

(in order of appearance)

1. **Katarin Roentgensdottir von Hapsburg** (female 30-35)
Princess of Klagenfurt, married to the Hapsburg Prince Wilhelm von Klagenfurt, Holy Roman Elector of Klagenfurt, Carinthia. Raised in a Dutch merchant family and cousin on her mother’s side to the Hapsburg Emperor Charles V of Spain. Older sister to Mariah.
2. **Mellifolio:** (male mid-late 30’s)
Highly ambitious and educated, former tutor, son of the poor Venetian laundress Jessica by the missing voyager Lorenzo, is thus considered illegitimate from birth. Never knew his Turkish Christian father; educated by a Jesuit Friar Topaz. Tutor to young Prince Alexander von Klagenfurt for the past 7 years. Being of mixed race and medium brown skin tone, he has faced bigotry all his life. Determined to raise himself to respectability by his achievements.
3. **Alexander von Klagenfurt** (male 14-25)-
Heir to the Holy Roman Electorate of Klagenfurt, only child of his father Wilhelm, and stepson to Katarin. His mother died in childbirth when he was five. Cousin to the king of Bohemia.
4. **Mopsa** (female 18-25)- Lady in waiting to Princess Katarin, talented lutist and singer, and former rural shepherdess.
5. **Dorcias:** (male mid 25-35) Widowed proprietress of the Black Mermaid Inn in Trieste, of Bohemian descent; working class, dark haired. Has two small children by her deceased husband. Has a sexual relationship with Captain Antonio whenever he is in town, but is neither entirely innocent nor promiscuous, and knows he is unlikely to marry her. Former shepherdess who grew up in Bohemia as girlhood friend of Mopsa.
6. **Feste** (male 16-25)-Fair-haired, itinerant musician, jester and acrobat, part of a family of troubadours who travel around the Adriatic and Alps providing seasonal entertainment to religious institutions and royal households.
7. **Randolph** (male 35-40)- Lieutenant of the Guard to Prince Wilhelm of Klagenfurt. Military commander and security professional
8. **Antonio:** (male mid 30’s) Wealthy sea-Captain of the ship Triton, native of Belmont, son of Portia and Bassanio, and god-son of the elder merchant Antonio of Venice. Brave, wily, true friend to Mellifolio. Light colored hair.
9. **Valentine** (male 20-25)- Milanese bourgeois courtier, favorite, thug and “fixer” of Orsino’s problems. Collects bribes and vigorish from ship captains and merchants of Trieste on behalf of Orsino.
10. **Orsino, Duke of Trieste** (male 25-40). Wealthiest landowner in the Trieste province, burly, bully, loves to hunt more than anything else except lending money. Has a long history of usury in the province and holds the mortgage on Castle Belmont thanks to encouraging his neighbor Bassanio to spend lavishly to maintain his dead wife’s estate of Belmont.
11. **Mariah Roentgensdottir van Hague** (female early 30’s) blonde, companion to Olivia. She is unmarried, but eager to regain through matrimony the social

position her Dutch family held in the Hague before their fallen fortunes forced Mariah to take an out-of-town job 10 years ago, as governess to the motherless Olivia. Engaged to marry Olivia's brother Hugh (and become the Countess of Belmont), before his untimely death as a result of an arrow wound received mysteriously while hunting boar.

12. **Countess Olivia:** (female age 18-20) brunette, recently orphaned heiress. Studious and self-educated in Classics and Venetian law, with the help of her older brother Hugh. Her mother Countess Portia died when she was 8. Her widowed father, Bassanio, an indebted sea merchant, recently died of heartbreak after Olivia's brother Hugh, Baronet of Belmont succumbed to an infected leg wound caused by a suspicious hunting accident. Her father's debts and luxurious lifestyle have led to the current financial crisis, and her lack of male relatives nearby has made her estate attractive to takeover by the neighboring nobility.
13. **Sir Tobias Belaccio (Toby):** (male 40-55) . Brother to Olivia's father Bassanio, widowed when he was 25, his 2 year old son died of diarrhea shortly thereafter, which prompted Toby to seek solace in military service against the Ottoman Turks in the 1529 Siege of Vienna. He later mortgaged (and lost) his ancestral lands to provide for his armour and continuing career as a mercenary against the Ottomans. Proud of his father's and grandfather's highly decorated military history in earlier Crusades, generous to a fault, spendthrift, athletic, fond of hunting, combat and all outdoor pursuits.

Suggested Doubling (5 women, 6 men)

- Alexander/Feste (male age 14-25)
- Randolph/Orsino (male age 25-40)

ACT I

Scene 1. Feb 1, 1542. Klagenfurt palace, in eastern Carinthia, a German province of the Holy Roman Empire. Princess Katarin arises out of her bed and Mellifolio awakes beside her.

Mellifolio

Where are you going love?

Katarin

You must away before my stepson seeks you for his morning lesson in Greek.

Mellifolio

But he had much wine last night, as did we. Surely he'll not rise early. Come back to bed. Your husband and his Hunters shall not return until noon.

Katarin

Scene 1. My love, I dare not linger to renew our passion. Our indiscretion last night brought us present joy, but may bring us future sorrows.

Mellifolio

How, darling?

Katarin

Your position as my stepson's tutor keeps you often at my husband's table, but a lord cannot countenance such liberties as you have taken with his lady. Nor such liberties as I have taken as his wife. These Hapsburg princes are a jealous tribe. My husband's cousin the King of Bohemia put off his wife for seventeen years and gave her infant to the wilderness to die, all on a mad unproven suspicion that she besmirched her vows with another King. How much worse shall I fare, his wife of five years whose loins have produced no fruit? We must believe and live as if these last seven nights together never happened, or were a secret dream.

Mellifolio

You cannot mean this? Are we never to have another night of each other's love? Prisoners as both we are, of your husband's cold and sterile house?

Katarin

Yes, nevermore in this house at least. I cannot vouchsafe your very life should his temper turn against us. Neither my husband the Prince, nor his son your charge, nor any soul under this roof must suspect us. One soul only have I allowed to know of my secret visitor, good Mopsa my maid, who sleeps across the outer door of this chamber to seal our privy. Yet your name and sex and reason I have kept from her, by veiling you as a postulant. Now cover and depart, 'Tis nearly cock's crow!

Mellifolio (*putting on the nun's habit he arrived in*)

My lady, it wounds my heart to hear these words but I see their wisdom, and so concur that safety must trim our sails. May we speak more of this in the garden after breakfast, when I supervise Alexander's botany lesson?

Katarin

Perhaps, but you must now away with one last kiss for love's memory. (*Noise without*) Even now I hear the maid stirring. Be minded you walk with a virgin's step, not the tread of a sated bull. Our very lives depend on this dissembling.

Scene 2. Scene: The Library of Belmont Castle on the Adriatic coast, just north of the town of Trieste, ITALY

Mariah (*enters*)

Countess, this letter has just come for you from the pier.

Olivia (*opens it*)

Why, 'tis from Toby.

Mariah

Your dear old nuncle?

Olivia

My cousin, in truth. He is two days march from Trieste, laden with all he owns! Mariah, we must make haste to fit up my brother's former chambers to receive him.

Mariah

'Tis now nearly a year since the letters you sent him, after your dear father died. Sir Toby has certainly taken his time to come mourn his cousin.

Olivia

Tis a long time indeed, but he's been in Serbia, fighting the Crusade against the Saracen horde.

Mariah

As I recall your father's telling, his cousin Toby is a brave but widowed noble?

Olivia

Toby's wife the Lady Clarice died in giving him a son. A very darling lad Domenico was, five years younger than me. I dandled him on my knee at four or five Christmasses. Then Domenico was taken with summer's complaint, and died. It was the double loss of Toby's wife and his only heir that sent him sent him to warring abroad. He said God had cursed his errant loins, and required him to atone by fighting for the Cross.

Mariah

And has he finished atoning, or will he go back to war for another ten years?

Olivia

He returns with some battlefield hurts, but homeless, for he nobly mortgaged his Croatian estate to equip himself for war. (*reads aloud*)

"I now have no hearth on which to rest. Perhaps a cousin's boon you'll give.

'Twould ease my weary sword-arm, if you'd ask me there to live."

Mariah

To renew a family bond after those that have just ended,
Should occasion a birthday feast. I think the timing splendid!

Olivia

Dear Friend, your festal plan's angelically Clairvoyant,
To see ahead where I did not. It makes my spirits buoyant!

Mariah

Under protection of your cousin, a noble, honored Knight,
Dare we not enlarge your feast, indeed even invite
Some eligible young men to appreciate your beauty,
And end this year of mourning, sad drudgery and duty?
Sir Toby could share your burdens until a husband you have chose,
And he'll spot in those assembled, the flaws their suits enclose.

Olivia

A small birthday feast I shall allow, but let's not invite the entire province. As I am Countess, it may be right that I should marry, but I have no taste for welcoming strangers as of yet. The death of my brother and my father still weigh heavy on my heart, a wound not fully healed.

But now we've let our hands grow idle Mariah, you must help me to air the linens, and to make all as comfortable to a soldier's bones as our poor household will allow. Two days! Come, let's begin. (Olivia exits--)

MARIAH

Heavens! Shall I count this cost as yet another mouth upon our larder,
Or welcome this Knight as a second provider,
Who'll help place game on milady's table with trap and crossbow?
Time, and his own inclinations, must be the judge.

(The sound of horse's hooves comes from the courtyard below. She goes to the window)

Toby *(shouting from courtyard, offstage)*

What ho! Someone, tell me how to find the castle of the Countess Olivia.

Olivia *(calling from window, offstage)*

Good Cousin Toby, you are a most welcome sight here! We only just received your letter.

Maria *(returns briskly)*

Why, he's very quick on his own letter's heels, we are scarcely prepared...

Olivia

The letter must have been slowed, or his horse too eager for home. Come I'll introduce you.

Mariah

Milady, I've just remembered that all the men and boys are out sheep shearing, and we've no one in the yard to stable Sir Toby's horse. *(Olivia exits)*. Not even one footman. I am mortified this noble Knight shall see our household much reduced, but for a bit more of noble blood in this house, we must arouse to do our best. *(exits)*

Scene 3. HOTHOUSE Gardens of Klagenfurt Palace, AUSTRIA. Alexander and Mellifolio with sketchpads.

Mellifolio

Notice how the stamen is more open now? Sit here and sketch it, so you can compare it with the drawing you made yesterday. After you finish I will show you how to pollinate the flower.

Alexander

Teacher, may we retire from this dull wives-work? I cannot see what my father has desired me to learn in Gardens, when very Kingdoms rise and fall each week in Battles all around us. Would not my mornings be better spent at training in the armory?

Mellifolio

As his only son, your father does not desire that you meet harm in arms by rushing into battle. One day you will take your place among his burgher's council, and knowing how to feed your people, with crops and cows and forage, will stand you in the light of a wise, beloved leader.

Alexander

But I'm away to Venice next month, surely I should learn about money and trade, and weapons and wine? Here's my stepmother. Let's ask her counsel. Good morrow Mother, what brings you to the garden in this chill hour?

Katarin*(enters)*

Good Morrow, Prince. I desired some lavender sachets for your father's hunting boots. His return will bring an odor of hounds into our dining hall. Did you rest well, my pet? There was no noise kept you awake?

Alexander

Only the moon, glaring like a second sun. I watched some Harts gambol in the Park during first watch, and wished myself in Venice. How long till I can go? I so much want to see the ships unload their trading wares, and sailors come from foreign lands bearing swords of many makers.

Katarin

Alexander dear, 'tis even six weeks yet, not 'til after Easter. Ah but I do confess this dreary winter gives me a mind to go with you. I've longed to renew my dusty gowns with eastern silken stuffs, and brocades to liven up your father's courtly gear. As I recall in Amsterdam, a price in town and a price at the pier are considerably far apart. Perhaps Master Mellifolio can instruct us in the merchant's art, with secret words in Venice tongue to master dockside bargains. What say you, my son's teacher?

Mellifolio

Lady, in all things not crossing your husband's, your wishes I oblige.
We'll begin today with table words, at midday meal or after.

Katarin

Shall we three dine in chambers the better to profit from our studies?

Alexander

But mother, father shall not like his return to go unnoticed. He'll want us in the Great Hall to welcome home his hunting party's bounty.

Katarin

Then after lunch, we three shall meet inside the tutor hall. I hope you've paper, pens and ink enough for me to use?

Mellifolio

My lady we have plenty. Now Sir Alexander must stay and sketch this blooming rose. May I show you a sunny bank where the lavender grows freshest? (*Mellifolio and Katarin exit*)

Scene 4. Orsino visits Olivia re: debt

The LIBRARY of Castle Belmont

Mariah:

Milady, do you desire more hot posset?

Olivia:

I could use a strong draught of tea to brace me in this beastly endeavor.

Mariah:

Poor dear, Cook says there are no more tea leaves. 'A has been boiling licorice root and grape seed for a substitute.

Olivia:

Even so, Mariah, we have stretched this mock- tea beyond all flavor, you may give me some boilt water with goats milk in, and take a cup with me. Ah, my late father's debts appear so very considerable I am like to drown, for in his grief over my brother's injury, he failed to keep much account of the earnings of our land. I'll be three months or more in sorting out these folios.

Mariah:

Olivia, you will pardon my tone, addressing you as I was wonted in your girlhood, but I've stood in place of your dead mother for most of these 10 years, and motherly, or at least, sisterly concern makes me, beseech you not to fret over these papers. 'Tis not worth a furrowed brow or the loss of precious candle tallow.

(a rude bell rings in the courtyard)

I'll just see who has come, as cook is up to her elbows with a blood pudding *(She leaves)*

Olivia(to herself)

Oh no, this same steward expects to arrive here by Michaelmas, I fear a letter may not reach him in time to spare his journeying.

(Mariah returns)

Mariah

Milady, pray make yourself tidy, for your neighbor the Duke Orsino is here without, and urgently desires a word with you.

Olivia

To claim his debts no doubt! Why does he intrude thus on my double mourning, with my brother hardly one month dead and my father buried a week since. Does this Duke not know our bereavéd state? I scarce have the proper weeds to wear to chapel.

Mariah

Hist, Milady! The Duke followed me even to this chamber door, and likely has heard our words.

Olivia

Here, I'll conceal myself behind the confessor screen, and do you tell him I am indisposed.
(Olivia conceals herself. Mariah opens the door, Orsino enters)

Mariah

The lady Olivia prays you will forgive her indisposition, your Grace. But so soon after losing the support of both her Father and her beloved brother, she has confined herself to prayers and solitude, and cannot be seen, even by the most solicitous of neighbors as thou, my lord, surely art. Even our county curate has not seen her in chapel this fortnight.

Orsino

(feels the warm teapot and fingers the letters) Ahh, it would seem only you her cicerone are here ensconced, taking comfort and totting up her accounts. Surely she did not rush away from your household's only fire, on news of my arrival?

Mariah

Milord you are too sharp to be deceived. My mistress is much wasted with grief and desires not to tax your good opinion of her beauty by too close a look at its storm-swept visage. She begs you will respect her grief, and bade me invite you to write to her, with pen and paper here provided.

Orsino

Say, Icannot stop to write just now ... as my time is pressing upon me.

Mariah

Shall I write for your Grace? I've a goodly hand. *(Orsino is silent)*

Or if you prefer, I will faithfully convey any message you would entrust to my ear.

Orsino

Very well then, you may tell your mistress from me, that I am much inconvenienced by a circumstance, which I hope--but have some doubt--will be in her power to relieve. As you both must surely know by the howling on these autumn nights, the mountain wolves are much about her northern woods, and more, have ventured into my paddock close, and have killed or carried off most of my newborn lambs. I cannot sustain so regular a loss in my flocks, and still hope to supply the Venetian trade with the fine tallow and lanolin for which my house is known. These northern woods of hers have not seen a hunting party at all since her brother's grievous wounding. And indeed, even before that, the woods lay sufficiently neglected to embolden the savage wolves to advance from the German slopes. I seek license to enter her woods with some force of my men, and others hired, to rid us of a hungry nuisance that would starve us all in turn.

I do not like bother your lady with such a formal request. Among the men, we have an understanding of what must be done, and were her brother or father alive, they would sooner pledge a purse toward my effort to rid the wolves, than to hinder its effect.

Mariah

My lord, I understand little in this, but you have my solemn word, that I'll press my mistress for an answer this very week. But you see, she is much a-bed these days, and I cannot vouch for what answer she might give. Do you look over the note I have made of your request, and tell me if it is a fair writ and copy of your words?

Orsino

(slapping the paper away and threatening her)

Woman! Do not temporize with me thus, with copies of my words, and untoward delays. I cannot be bothered with reading! Each night the wolves grow bolder, and my flock gets thinner and colder! My grandfather in years past faced a similar threat, so petitioned the Doge in Venice, and won the right to burn them out of the forest. If I do not have satisfaction from Olivia, by a writ to license this hunt, I may choose to avail myself of relief by torching the wolf's woody lair!

(Olivia suddenly reveals herself)

Olivia

My lord your Grace, what shouts are these! Calculated thus to disturb my prayer?

Surely never was a pious grief as mine compounded by such violent threats as you have done, and all directed at the humble woman who stands to me in place of my dead mother! Nay, perhaps my maiden mind is much addled with grief, but I thought I recalled you were a kind and prudent man, or am I much mistaken?

Orsino

O fair one, forgive my outburst. But I see you heard all I said, from your place of concealment; I need not repeat.

Olivia

Pray, tell me then, since you spake of your Right of the Torch, in what volume of the Doge's Statutes doth such a Law appear printed?

Mariah

Duke, perhaps you do not know that before he took the fated arrow to his leg, milady's brother was much given to the study of the Law, and she at his side for seven years with her father's blessing. Tutored thus by her brother, my lady cannot now be cozened with talk of the Venetian laws!

Olivia

Nor in Venice, nor in all Trieste, did I ever hear of this law of the Torch you have named! Indeed, I'd expect that Venice, an empire of merchants, and much enamoured with her ships and shipbuilders, would instead forbid such careless forest burning as you have here. A woodland yields pitch, and paint, and spars and keels and boatribs, much more profitably than ashes.

Orsino

Milady, perhaps you do not know, that recently the rulers of Venice, her merchants' board, hath decreed it a crime to stop up the city's vital commerce, especially the trade in necessities. They much depend on my produce of soaps, and tallow, and all these things your wolves are like to halt. Surely your reading of the law has acquainted you with the serious consequence of crossing the merchant's fortunes. All I ask is that we be allowed to hunt the wolf.

Olivia

My lord, I am much indebted to you for this information, I had no word of it before. I assure you that even now, my own peasants hunt these wolves, to protect my own goats. I too have much to lose from the ravening horde. My household table relies for its meat upon the game found in our woods.

Orsino

Since fate has conspired that there is no living nobleman now about your household, lady, you should lean on me like brother in advising managing your woods. If you will allow my men to

take such lumber as they need, I shall see you handsomely supplied with fish and shellfish from Poseidon's nets.

Olivia

I think my father's spirit would not like it sir, if I should so soon contract to strip our limited lands. A tree of 30 minutes cutting may take 30 years to grow again.

Orsino

I fear these paper matters are too much for your woman's brain in your time of grief. It pains me to see two ladies shut up here all alone, with no masculine shoulder on which to lean, and only each other to consult in matters of the earth. Such is most properly men's work.

Olivia

And yet the law of our republic allows that a women such as I may inherit an estate in freehold from father or from brother. Surely you would not restrict a woman more than does the Doge?

Orsino

I like your noisome spirit, and your will to bear up. Indeed I take a kind of tonic from your firm rebuffs. Allow me to send my best factotum to you tomorrow. As secretary, good Valentine will help to sort through this mass of papers and these debts, and arrange for your comfort until you are free to think of marrying, as a young girl of three and twenty must. Perhaps I shall one day succeed my grandfather as Elector, and be of value to represent you in Germany, as well as Venice.

Olivia

I thank you for your kindness sir, but my uncle Toby is even now come from Dalmatia to live here, and it was my father's dying wish that his younger brother should have a hand in all. Therefore no aid is wanted from the vaunted Valentine. Now if you will excuse Mariah and me, we have much to do, to prepare quarters for some guests my uncle brings.

Orsino

I do not think it quite neighborly to leave you alone in your distress. Yet no rejoinder will I make.

Mariah

(escorting Orsino to the door)

Come your grace, if Valentine is as good a man as I have heard, you must bring him to dine with us when you come for Christmas feast. My lady is like to have a freer eye for pleasure in a few months, and I hope by then we shall all wear warm wolf skins trimming our cloaks *(they exit)*

Olivia

O Father, what a near scrape we are in. The preponderance of our family's debt, if he only knew its full measure, would make Orsino push me into bankruptcy to recover his unpaid loan to you,

rather than wait for me to come flush. I wager he shall send Valentine to spy over us on the morrow, despite my protest. Well, let him come! Mariah and I will busy ourselves till then with burning or hiding such papers as he may seek.

(Mariah returns)

Maria, do you go through this stack of debts and make a ledger, which to keep well guarded. Then afterward do burn the bills themselves, or at least seal them up in a close place beknownst only to me and you.

(Olivia leaves)

Mariah*(sighs)*

Perhaps it would be well for my lady to put herself in stronger hands, and to marry. For then I should have finally fulfilled my governing duty to the girl, and be free myself to marry. Even an evil man may be better to look at across one's breakfast table, than an old woman across one's dressing table. Alas, I'll not see the like of her brother's generous hand and comely face again, so I must husband my charms toward a lighter day anon.

Scene 5. MARCH 15, 1542. KLAGENFURT CASTLE SCHOOLROOM.
Mellifolio is giving Alex and Kat their daily Italian lesson

Alexander

"Il migliore principe parla solo dopo una lunga riflessione." Master Mellifolio, how does this dull philosophy teach me to know Venice?

Mellifolio

Why Alex, surely you want to learn to think like the Venetians. Their empire is held together, not by force, but by men's consent and contracts. They think of business a great deal, and never like a tyrant. In all matters of governing, fairness is their rule. To see the soul of Venice truly, you must look past the crates and coins, to the handshakes and embraces that govern trading. 'Tis in repeating fair bargains by which these men prosper, not in beguiling a single windfall.

Alexander

But what need I care about trade? I shall quash the heretic Luther mobs and Turkish hordes, not trade with them.

Mellifolio

My Lad, in your lifetime, you'll soon find that trade goods circulate farther into northern lands than even they do here. In my boyhood, eastern silks were rare, infrequently seen on the Venice pier. My mother was a Dyer who filled many vats with woolens and kept few for silks. But now she says fine silkens come every month, and some already dyed.

Katarin