



FOUR MALCONTENTS

BY

MICHAEL HOWARD

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor EZRA NEIGHBORS writes...Your psychiatrist is banging your wife... A tale as old as time... The primal nature of desire and what lengths we go to invoke the love from the ones we want are both rooted deeply in Four Malcontents by Michael Howard. With text rich in structure, farce, and satire, we are taken on a whirlwind of two malcontented couples in a chess game of infidelity. The players in this game are grandmasters in their schemes, and the heightened dialogue creates massive caverns of subtext just waiting to be explored. (Spacing is playwright's own.)*

Four Malcontents

1

MATTHEW, *a man in his early thirties, sits on a black leather arm chair in the office of DR. BROWN, a psychiatrist in his middle fifties. DR. BROWN sits in an arm chair nicer than the one MATTHEW is sitting in. They are facing each other.*

MATTHEW [*distraught*]: I don't know how much longer I can take it, Doc. I really don't.

DR. BROWN: Have you tried talking to her about it?

MATTHEW: What's the point?

DR. BROWN: Well—

MATTHEW [*speaking through him*]: She'll just accuse me of projecting onto her. Every time I try to breach a subject—

DR. BROWN: Broach.

MATTHEW: What's that?

DR. BROWN: Subjects are broached. Agreements and walls are breached.

MATTHEW [*crossly*]: That's not what I need right now. That's the last thing I need right now. Language correction. I'm trying to tell you that I don't think my marriage can be salvaged and you're—you're being a—

DR. BROWN: Pedant.

MATTHEW: What?

DR. BROWN: Nothing. Forgive me. Please, every time you broach a subject---

MATTHEW [*hesitating*]: Every time I *broach* a subject, she says I'm projecting onto her. Or displacing onto her. According to her I'm either projecting or displacing at all times. Sometimes both. She stopped making meals for me, by the way. That's a new development. Says it's phallogocentric.

DR. BROWN: What do you do for dinner now?

MATTHEW: I don't know. I'd rather not talk about that. [*He stands and paces back and forth behind the arm chair.*] I don't know where it went sideways. There's just no connection now. She's off somewhere else. If I could only pinpoint where and when it started to go off the rails. [*He stops pacing and looks at DR. BROWN.*] You have notes, don't you? Maybe that's where the answer is. That's where it lies. Look and see when I first complained about our sex life. It's always about sex, isn't it? That's what you people say.

DR. BROWN: When was the last time you engaged in sexual congress?

MATTHEW [*sitting back down*]: It's been a long time. A very long time. The other night ...

DR. BROWN: Yes?

MATTHEW [*discreetly*]: Well—the other night she—we were in bed, and she let me perform—with my mouth. What's the word?

DR. BROWN: Oral sex.

MATTHEW: Yes, but the word. The term for it.

DR. BROWN: Cunnilingus.

MATTHEW: Cunnilingus. She let me perform cunnilingus on her. I don't like it, but I assume she does. So I'm doing my damndest, trying very hard to please her, you know, because it's a chance to get things back on track, to right the ship, and when I look up she's reading a book. A book! Just lying there with her head propped up on a pillow, reading—like she couldn't possibly be more bored by it all. Licking her finger before turning the pages. Like a librarian. The whole nine yards. She was just totally blasé.

DR. BROWN: You mean, blasé.

MATTHEW: Jesus Christ.

DR. BROWN: Forgive me. Really. How did that make you feel?

MATTHEW: That she was reading a book while I performed ...

DR. BROWN: Cunnilingus.

MATTHEW: While I performed cunnilingus?

DR. BROWN: Yes.

MATTHEW [*deflated*]: I've never felt so small in my life.

DR. BROWN: It's a tough thing.

MATTHEW [*brightening slightly*]: Has it happened to you?

DR. BROWN: Well, I—you say you don't think your marriage can be saved?

MATTHEW: I'm coming to that conclusion.

DR. BROWN: That's a real pity.

MATTHEW: I do wonder if she's screwing around.

DR. BROWN [*curiously*]: Do you have any reason to believe that she is?

MATTHEW: I don't see why not. Anything's possible at this point. She works late a few nights a week. And then she goes out with her girlfriends sometimes too. Allegedly.

DR. BROWN: That's not necessarily indicative of an affair.

MATTHEW: Not necessarily. But probably, Doc. Anything's possible. Anyway it hardly matters. As I said I don't know that it can be saved anymore. I don't know that it's worth saving. I think she hates me. And maybe it's becoming mutual.

DR. BROWN: Are you perhaps considering going nuclear?

MATTHEW [*astonished*]: You mean—doing her in?

DR. BROWN: Goodness me, no. I was alluding to divorce.

MATTHEW [*sighing heavily*]: Oh. Well. I might be, Doc. I just might be.

2

MATTHEW *walks through the front door of the suburban home he shares with his wife CORA, a pretty woman in her early thirties. CORA is sitting on the sofa in the living room with her laptop.*

MATTHEW: Good evening.

CORA: [*looking up from her computer, derisively*]: How was your therapy session?

MATTHEW: Not great.

CORA: That's too bad. You know, a man in therapy is not very attractive. Look at Woody Allen.

MATTHEW: He was good enough for Mia Farrow. [*He drops his keys on the kitchen table and walks into the living room.*] For a little while.

CORA: What do you talk about in there, anyway? What do you divulge when you're sprawled on that couch? What do you vouchsafe?

MATTHEW: That's my business. And it's not a couch. It's a chair—I sit in a chair.

CORA: You talk about *me*, don't you. I know you talk about me. You disclose all of your depraved subconscious inclinations. Your id flails around unchained. Like that of a *Homo erectus*.

MATTHEW: That's between me and Dr. Brown.

CORA: I'd like to meet him.

MATTHEW: I'm not letting you anywhere near him.

CORA: Why not? What are you afraid of? You think I'll fall in love with him or something? You think I'm that susceptible to a cultivated and refined man?

MATTHEW [*defensively*]: I'm not afraid of anything. [*He sits on the loveseat on the other side of the living room.*] How do you know he's refined?

CORA: If I asked Dr. Brown, would he say the same?

MATTHEW: About what?

CORA: Your not being afraid.

MATTHEW: I don't care what he says. Or thinks. The man is a quack.

CORA [*typing something on her laptop*]: And yet you give him your hard-earned dollars. Or should I say your father's hard-earned dollars.

MATTHEW: My father has nothing whatsoever to do with this. I pay for the sessions myself. You know that as well as I do. The fact of the matter is that Dr. Brown is a quack.

CORA: Why don't you fire him?

MATTHEW: I might. I just might.

CORA: Always 'might.' Such indecision. You know, if you were a little more decisive maybe you wouldn't need to consult a shrink.

MATTHEW: I've been consulting shrinks since I was eleven. My family are big believers in shrinks.

CORA: It could be that you're still in love with your mother.

MATTHEW: I seriously doubt that.

CORA: Or that you had a habit of collecting and retaining your feces when you were small. That can account for avarice. You can be quite avaricious.

MATTHEW: Are we going to have sex tonight?

CORA: Did you shit all over the place when you were a kid? I mean, were you the expulsive type? That might explain why your car is such a mess, for example.

MATTHEW: I want to have sex.

CORA: No, you don't. You only think you do. You're using sex to sublimate something more depraved.

MATTHEW: God dammit, either you let me have you or I'll—I'll—

CORA: You'll what? Unleash your id? I don't think so. [She guffaws.] Don't forget there's a police station just down the road. They can be here in thirty seconds flat. They're very efficient.

MATTHEW: Dr. Brown says we must have sex. He says if we don't engage in sexual congress we can kiss our marriage goodbye.

CORA: Dr. Brown is a quack. Said so yourself.

MATTHEW: Dr. Brown says we must never have sex. He says if we have sex we can kiss our marriage goodbye.

CORA: Sounds like a lose-lose.

MATTHEW: I may kill myself tonight. I'm considering it.

CORA [*typing rapidly*]: You don't have the means. Plus, they say threats of suicide are always idle. It's when someone doesn't threaten suicide that you should worry. That's a proven fact.

MATTHEW: I want a divorce.

CORA: On what grounds?

MATTHEW: Adultery.

CORA [*guffawing*]: Nobody projects the way you do. Your defense mechanisms are sublime. Just absolutely sublime.

3

CORA and DR. BROWN sit together at a small table in a bustling Italian restaurant. On the table is a half-empty bottle of red wine, two partially-filled wine glasses, two full water glasses, and two plates of pasta. DR. BROWN appears perturbed and uncomfortable. CORA shovels forkfuls of pasta into her mouth.

DR. BROWN: I'm not so sure this ought to go on the way it has thus far. His neuroses are growing more pronounced and I feel it's my fault.

CORA [*masticating pasta*]: How many does he have?

DR. BROWN: There's a desperation in his manner that I hadn't identified previously. Has he been drinking?

CORA: Drinking? God, no. He never drinks. That's part of the problem. He has no vices whatsoever. [*She tosses back her wine and fills both their glasses.*] I can't get along with someone like that.

DR. BROWN: Why did you marry him?

CORA [*reflecting*]: There was a tenderness about him ... It grates on me now.

DR. BROWN: He told me about what happened the other night.

CORA: Which night?

DR. BROWN: You know—when he—

CORA: When he what?

DR. BROWN [*leaning forward, discreetly*]: When he made an effort to—stimulate you.

CORA: Oh yeah? What did he say?

DR. BROWN: Well, frankly, he said you began perusing a book.

CORA [*laughing freely*]: He's a gas.

DR. BROWN: It's true, then?

CORA: Probably. You'd have to specify which night you're talking about. And which book. I've been reading a lot of Lacan. Also Lévi-Strauss. Have you read any Jakobson? I like him. Are you going to finish that?

[DR. BROWN *shakes his head and slumps back in his chair. CORA reaches over and twirls some of his pasta around her fork. DR. BROWN scratches his head. He wants to say something but doesn't know how. CORA pushes the pasta into her mouth and looks at him. She narrows her eyes.*]

CORA [*with her mouth full*]: What's the matter? Why the long face?

DR. BROWN: Can I ask you something?

CORA: Of course.

DR. BROWN: When we're ... engaged ... are you at all inclined to, well, read?

CORA [*rolling her eyes*]: Good grief. I think your neuroses are growing more pronounced.

DR. BROWN [*eagerly*]: Is that a yes or a no?

CORA: Have I ever wanted to read while we fuck?

DR. BROWN [*looking around sheepishly*]: Please, Cora, not so loud. But, in a manner of speaking, yes. Have you ever been so inclined? I must know. This instant.

CORA [*finishing DR. BROWN'S pasta*]: Really, such pushiness. I'll let you know tonight. Your place, right? That wife of yours is still out of town?

DR. BROWN: Won't he worry about you?

CORA: God almighty. I told him I'd be out late. It's all taken care of. Don't you worry your little psychiatric head. [*She looks at DR. BROWN, who is furrowing his brow.*] I promise not to read.

DR. BROWN: I don't know that coitus is such an advisable course of action at this juncture.

CORA: You're kidding.

DR. BROWN: I'm quite serious. It doesn't seem quite ethical to me. And the idea of your opening a book while I—

CORA: Ethical? So you've developed a super-ego all of a sudden?

DR. BROWN [*defensively*]: I've always had one. We all have one.

CORA [*viciously*]: Freud and Jung were petty frauds. The Scientologists are right. I've been reading Dianetics. I might cast my lot with COS.

DR. BROWN [*composing himself*]: I'm not taking that bait. You're attempting to provoke me. It's transparent and I won't give you the satisfaction. The point is we need to reassess this situation. It calls for reassessment on the part of both parties.

CORA: I don't share that view.

DR. BROWN: What about your husband's view?

CORA: What about it?

DR. BROWN: How would you feel if you discovered that he was engaged in carnal transactions with another woman?

CORA [*considering*]: I don't know. It might do him some good.

DR. BROWN: He also said he's considering divorcing you.

CORA: He always says that. I don't think he has the balls. In fact I know he hasn't. He's characterized by a general lack of balls. It's related to his castration complex.

[DR. BROWN *anxiously readjusts the napkin on his lap.*]

4

MRS. BROWN, *a good-looking middle-aged woman, is in her kitchen chopping vegetables. The sun has gone down and all the lights in the kitchen are on. There is a knock at the front door. MRS. BROWN walks out of the kitchen into the hallway. When she answers the door she finds MATTHEW standing under the light on the porch.*

MRS. BROWN: Can I help you?

MATTHEW: Hello, Mrs. Brown? Yes, it's you. I've seen your picture on your husband's desk.

MRS. BROWN [*warily*]: Are you a friend of my husband's?

MATTHEW: Yes, I am. In a manner of speaking. We've known each other for years. My name is Matthew. Is he in?

MRS. BROWN: I'm afraid not.

MATTHEW: Oh ... that's too bad. Do you expect him soon?

MRS. BROWN: Not exactly. He tends to work late Wednesdays.

MATTHEW: I see ...

MRS. BROWN: Is this a—professional matter? I mean, your wanting to see my husband?

MATTHEW: Well, to be absolutely frank with you, Mrs. Brown, it is. You see, there's something I must ask him. It won't take five minutes.

MRS. BROWN: How do you know where he lives? Where we live?

MATTHEW: Well, in keeping with the absolute frankness, Mrs. Brown, he happened to have a piece of mail on his desk during one of our sessions, and I happened to have a momentary gander at it. Quite involuntary, really. One of those things. Unconscious, you might say. Anyhow, I happened to store it in my memory. You know, in case of an emergency. It's rather photographic. My memory, I mean.

MRS. BROWN: Is this an emergency?

MATTHEW: In a manner of speaking, Mrs. Brown.

MRS. BROWN [*changing her tone*]: You're a very guileful young man.

MATTHEW: I have my moments.

MRS. BROWN: Have you had dinner yet, Matthew?

MATTHEW: I have not, Mrs. Brown. I haven't been eating dinner much at all lately, as a matter of fact. Not since my wife decided to stop cooking.

MRS. BROWN: I see. What a pity. I was just going to toss a salad when you knocked. You're welcome to come inside and wait for my husband if you'd like. I've got a nice bottle of Malbec.

MATTHEW: That's very good of you, Mrs. Brown, but I don't drink.

MRS. BROWN: I will let you inside on the condition that you have a glass of wine.

MATTHEW: OK, Mrs. Brown, OK. If that's the way it has to be.

[MRS. BROWN *opens the door wider and stands aside*. MATTHEW *smiles and walks by her into the house*.]

MATTHEW: This is a beautiful house you have here, Mrs. Brown.

MRS. BROWN: Stop calling me Mrs. Brown.

MATTHEW: What shall I call you?

MRS. BROWN: My name is Sally.

MATTHEW: That's a nice name. [*He looks at the luggage in the hallway.*] Did you just come from the airport, Sally?

MRS. BROWN: Yes. I was going to be out of town until Friday, but a meeting was canceled. The CEO suffered a drug overdose. So here I am. [*She leads MATTHEW into the kitchen and opens the bottle of wine. She pours two glasses and gives one to MATTHEW. She begins tossing the salad.*]

MATTHEW: How late did you say he ordinarily works on Wednesdays?

MRS. BROWN: Very late. Could be hours yet.

MATTHEW: Is that so? I hope he doesn't have a bad reaction when he finds me in his house. Do you think he will, Mrs.—I mean, Sally?

MRS. BROWN: He might.

MATTHEW: Do you think I'd better go?

MRS. BROWN: Oh, no—I think it's much better if you stay.

MATTHEW: OK then.

MRS. BROWN: You haven't touched your wine.

MATTHEW: I beg your pardon. [*He takes a sip.*]

MRS. BROWN: So tell me, Matthew. Are you satisfied with my husband's services?

MATTHEW: Oh yes. Very much so. Dr. Brown is a splendid psychiatrist. The best I've had.

MRS. BROWN: Have you had many?

MATTHEW: Seventeen.

MRS. BROWN: Good God.

MATTHEW: It's hard to find the right one, Sally. There are a lot of genuine quacks out there.

MRS. BROWN [*glancing at her watch*]: Are you attracted to me, Matthew?

MATTHEW: I beg your pardon?

MRS. BROWN: I said, do you find me physically attractive? Voluptuous, perhaps?

MATTHEW [*reluctantly*]: Well, yes, frankly, I do, Sally. You're a very pleasant-looking woman, in spite of your age. Dr. Brown is very lucky.

MRS. BROWN: Do I fill you with amorous impulses, Matthew? [*She moves closer so that their bodies are almost in contact.*]

MATTHEW: Mrs. Brown, I—

MRS. BROWN: Sally.

MATTHEW: Sally. I was really hoping to, erm, how do you say, convey an important message to your husband about my—

MRS. BROWN: My husband and I haven't fucked in months. He thinks me frigid. Does he talk about that with you?

MATTHEW: Why, no. Of course not. We tend to concentrate on my issues. Which is why I came here tonight, Sally. You see, earlier today I was—

MRS. BROWN: When was the last time you fucked your wife?

MATTHEW [*laughing nervously, flushing*]: Well—that's really not a topic that need be—breached at this, erm—

MRS. BROWN: Broached.

MATTHEW: That's right. Broached. What did I say? Breached?

MRS. BROWN: Would you like to fuck me, Matthew?

MATTHEW [*flushing harder*]: Perhaps I really should be on my way now, Sally.

MRS. BROWN: If you don't fuck me I'll tell my husband that you did.

MATTHEW: You will?

MRS. BROWN [*nodding*]: And I'll ensure that your wife finds out.

MATTHEW: But—but there's nothing to find out.

MRS. BROWN: Does she trust you?

MATTHEW [*scratching his head*]: No.

MRS. BROWN: Then you see my point.

MATTHEW [*resignedly*]: Yes, I suppose I do.

MRS. BROWN: I'm glad. Now then ...

[*They kiss. Moments later there are voices outside. The front door opens and DR. BROWN walks into the kitchen with CORA. MRS. BROWN stops kissing MATTHEW. They all stand looking at each other.*]

DR. BROWN: Sweet mother of Christ.

MATTHEW: Cora!

CORA: Matthew?

MATTHEW: I can explain.

DR. BROWN [*pointing at MATTHEW*]: What in God's good name are you doing in my house?

MRS. BROWN: I invited him in.

DR. BROWN: Oh, you did, did you?

MRS. BROWN: He's quite charming.

DR. BROWN: Oh, he is, is he?

MATTHEW: What are you doing here, Cora?

CORA: I might ask you the same thing.

DR. BROWN: This is an outrage! What in the name of all that is decent are you doing with my wife?

MATTHEW: What are you doing with mine?

DR. BROWN [*stammering*]: Well—that's—that's—that's—

MATTHEW [to CORA, *incredulously*]: Are you—*involved* with this wrinkled old quack?

CORA: Define involved.

DR. BROWN: Who are you calling wrinkled? [*He looks at MRS. BROWN.*] Why were you amorously embracing this hopeless neurotic? Don't bother trying to deny it—I saw you plain as day.

MRS. BROWN: As I said, he's rather charming.

DR. BROWN: I'll show him charming. [*He takes a butcher knife from the counter and brandishes it.*]

MATTHEW: Hopeless neurotic, eh? That's how you talk about your patients, eh? [*He takes a knife for himself.*]

[*DR. BROWN and MATTHEW square off in the center of the kitchen, swinging their knives through the air.*]

DR. BROWN: I'll gut him! Slice him into ribbons! Just wait!

MATTHEW: Don't worry, Cora, this will only take a minute.

CORA [*addressing MRS. BROWN*]: How long have you been married?

MRS. BROWN: Eighteen years. And you?

CORA: We've been married five. But it feels like eighteen. Or eighty. Do you like your husband?

MRS. BROWN: Not especially. Do you like yours?

CORA: Not at all. Do you like mine?

MRS. BROWN: Oh, no. I was only using him to provoke mine. You see, I knew he was stepping out.

CORA: Sorry about that.

MRS. BROWN: No, no, it's quite alright. You're not the first. Do you like my husband?

CORA: I thought I did. But I was mistaken. He has far too many neuroses for my taste.

MRS. BROWN: He projects his inadequacies.

CORA: I've observed that.

MRS. BROWN: Does Matthew do the same?

CORA: Constantly. He has the emotional maturity of a prepubescent child.

MRS. BROWN: That was my impression.

CORA: Men.

MRS. BROWN: They're all alike.

CORA: It makes you wonder.

MRS. BROWN: It most certainly does.

CORA [*indicating the bottle of wine*]: What have you there?

MRS. BROWN: Malbec.

CORA: Oh, I love a good Malbec.

MRS. BROWN: Your husband didn't appreciate it. He had only one sip.

CORA: It's just like him to do that.

MRS. BROWN: What do you say you and I take the bottle onto the patio where it's quiet and comfortable? There's a Jacuzzi.

CORA: I say that's a fabulous idea. But I haven't a bathing suit

MRS. BROWN: You needn't worry about that.

[*Bearing the wine they walk together past MATTHEW and DR. BROWN, who are still squaring off.*]

DR. BROWN: Blackguard! Knave! You'll pay! [*He swings his knife at the air.*]

MATTHEW: It's your move, old-timer. Just know it will be your last.

MRS. BROWN: Don't mind us.

[*The women exit. It's another minute before the men realize they're gone, at which point they lower their knives and begin looking around in confusion as the kitchen grows dimmer.*]

CURTAIN

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: "Four Malcontents" *began as an idea for a serious short story. When I sat down to write it, it asserted itself as a pseudo-Freudian farce. I had no choice in the matter.*

AUTHOR BIO: Michael Howard's essays and short fiction have recently appeared/will soon appear in Mekong Review, New World Writing, Gordon Square Review, Avalon Literary Review, and others. He lives in Vietnam.

