

SHAKESPEARE RESTORED

An Excerpt

by
Scott Glander

Scott Glander
scott@scottglander.com

Characters

THEOBALD -- Lewis Theobald, lawyer, writer and Shakespearean critic, 37 years old

POPE -- Alexander Pope, poet, translator and editor of Shakespeare, 37 years old

ELECTRA -- from Sophocles' *Electra*

CLYTEMNESTRA -- Electra's mother

CHRYSOTHMIS -- Electra's sister

CHORUS 1 (doubles with Chrysothmis)

CHORUS 2 (doubles with Clytemnestra)

Setting

London: the study of Lewis Theobald. (The Electra scenes play throughout Theobald's study)

Time

Autumn, 1725.

ACT I

A study. There is a reading chair and a desk. There is a bust of Athena. Papers, books and manuscripts are piled on the desk.

Lewis THEOBALD sits at his desk, reading a book.

THEOBALD

(To Self)

Confounding, absolutely confounding! How is one to make any sense out of this mess? How indeed? Yes, Mr Stede, you are correct -- Shakespeare Restored will need an appendix. Mr Pope you absolutely boggle the mind.

(Grabs book and searches)

Enter Alexander POPE. POPE carries a manuscript. POPE is unseen by THEOBALD

THEOBALD (cont'd)

Your knowledge of Shakespeare's time is nil! You know not the least comings-and-goings of the backstage. Indisputable!

(Reads)

"A table of Greenfield's. A table was directed to be brought in. Greenfield was the name of the property-man in that time who furnished implements for actors."

(To Self)

Oh, Mr Pope, your notes are creative, maybe even ingenious -- but are they accurate? No, of course not! Mr Stede is this a corrupt passage? Do you agree with me that prompters' notes, on occasion found their way into Shakespeare's scripts through printers' errors? But have you ever in your entire career in the theatre, seen one prompt book with one note scribbled in the margin that gave the actual name of a property man? No, of course not! And would this note be in the middle of this scene? No, of course not! And would it be wrong to suggest that it would be about a page before the scene would begin? No, of course not!

(Waits)

Well, Mr Stede?

(Looks up)

Oh, you're not here yet. He has me talking to myself now.

(Takes breath)

This is wrong, all wrong. What can you possibly be thinking Mr Pope? Editors dig into a corrupt text. They find and they discover. They seek the writer himself and what he wrote -- whatever it may be, but you don't change it. YOUR CONJECTURE IS WRONG MR POPE!

POPE clears throat

THEOBALD (cont'd)

(Without looking at Pope)

Ah, Mr Stede, you're just in time --

(Looks for book)

I'm looking for an old *Edition of Shakespeare*. A rather large book. It might be on that other shelf over there. This is for your appendix, Mr Stede. I'm looking for *Henry the Fifth*. The scene, Mistress Quickly telling of the death of Falstaff.

(Finds book. Searches book)

There was a note, a note in the margin of the book. To edit a corrupt text, Mr Stede, you must place yourself within the text. To be the writer. Urrr!

(Slams book closed)

To be inside the head of William Shakespeare. Ah-ha,

(Finds book. Searches)

To be inside of the character. Falstaff is old and dying. Mistress Quickly says, "his nose was as sharp as a pen, and a table of greenfields?" Uhhhhhh!

(Slams book closed)

The frustration of sifting through trying to decipher these poorly printed and corrupt passages. When you find it, it should be a hand-written note on the left-page --

(Finds book. Searches)

Henry, Henry, Henry, where are you Henry. I know you're in here somewhere. Where do you hide the hand-written note, where, where can you be. Left-page where are you, left-page, left-page, left -- EUREKA! This is it Mr Stede -- listen,

(Reads)

"For his nose was as sharp as a pen, and he talked,"

(Speaks)

ah, he talked. He talked of green fields. An old man talking of sunshine and lush green fields. What could be more natural than a "second childishness" as Monsieur Jaques once said?

POPE

(Under his breath)

Oh my.

THEOBALD

Don't babble Mr Stede! That's it! I know it is! Talked, yes. Talked, not table. This makes the utmost sense. I'll have Mr Pope babbling to himself ...

(Discovering)

Babbling? Babbling ... a babbling old man.

(Carefully)

Though it would be corrupt in spelling, if you change the "t" in table, to a "b," you'd get bable. Pronounce it, babble.

(Reads)

"For his nose was as sharp as a pen and he babbled of green fields."

(Speaks)

How simple. One letter changes everything.

POPE

Simple, I think not. Perhaps if one has that book, but otherwise I'm afraid --

THEOBALD

Why Mr Stede what's wrong with your -- you're not Mr Stede.

POPE

No, I'm not Mr Stede. My name is Alexander Pope.

THEOBALD

Why, why -- I, why, I, why, I, I, I, I, I, I, I didn't see you come in, Mr Pope!

POPE

I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. I was let in.

THEOBALD

Indeed.

POPE

I have something of yours.
(Shows Manuscript)

THEOBALD

Oh my.

POPE

A friend asked me to drop this manuscript off, if you are the Mr Theobald, about whom I've been told.

THEOBALD

I'm Lewis Theobald, at your service.

POPE

Well, let us hope so. I've been wanting to meet you -- to thank you for the kind words in your book of poetry.

THEOBALD

The Grove. Yes, thank you for all four of your subscriptions. I trust you enjoyed them?

POPE

By all means. I was most impressed with your ... collecting abilities. And you write, too, and you translate -- like me?

THEOBALD

Like you, Mr Pope -- well yes, I suppose, well I try, I, I, I'm not as, or even as, as you, but -- no, I mean -- you're a truly great poet. I am not, but, yes I, I do try.

POPE

So I've heard. You seem to know who I am?

THEOBALD

I was at Button's Coffee House when a friend saw you coming out of Will's Coffee House and he pointed you out.

POPE

And you remembered me -- I am honored.

THEOBALD

Yes, well, you have a memorable shape.

POPE

Like a question mark --

THEOBALD

Or Richard the Third.

POPE

Is that what your Buttonian friend said?!

THEOBALD

By no means. He said nothing unkind. Nothing but praise --

POPE

Balderdash! I know what those hack writers say about me!

THEOBALD

Not all of them.

POPE

(Over Theobald))

They poke and prod with their tirades.

THEOBALD

I'm terribly sorry. Some of the clientele at Button's -- not all, but some do not agree with those writers.

POPE

Well ... there was no harm done, I assure you. I'm really rather thick-skinned, if the absolute truth were to be known.

THEOBALD

But --

POPE

RUMORS AND GOSSIP, I ASSURE YOU!

THEOBALD

Once again, I'm terribly sorry.

POPE

And I'm sorry *The Censor* is no more.

THEOBALD

My periodical? I didn't know you knew of it.

POPE

It was a tri-weekly, as I recall.

THEOBALD

How good of you to mention it. And I must say that I think your *Iliad* is, without doubt -- the most magnificent translation of Homer the English language has ever seen.

POPE

Why, thank you. That is most kind and coming from a man of your esteemed literary reputation --

THEOBALD

Me? Esteemed? I do not have a literary reputation.

POPE

Would you like one?

THEOBALD

I beg your pardon.

POPE

Would you like to have a literary reputation?

THEOBALD

What do I need to --

POPE

(Throws down manuscript)

Don't write this book!

Enter ELECTRA, dressed as a servant.

ELECTRA

It is a night of bad omens. Horror strikes at my heart. Blood is everywhere. They howled -- howled with laughter. Treachery and deceit rule this kingdom now. Unimaginable horror!

My unhappy father, Agamemnon, is dead. Killed by his wife, my mother, Clytemnestra, and her secret paramour, Aegisthus. My mother, my mother, lured him inside the palace and covered him in a luxurious cloak proclaiming his victory over Troy -- her victory cloak.

The cloak weighed him down so he couldn't defend himself. Then he came in, Aegisthus, and he took an axe and split -- no, no it doesn't matter. It won't change what happened. It won't change what will happen. The gods must be angry. My mother and her treacherous paramour are drunk with their blood-soaked success. They are proud, boasting throughout the palace of their victory over King Agamemnon. The gods will not stand for this, I'm sure of it.

(Kneels before bust of Athena)

ELECTRA (cont'd)

By all that is holy great Athena, daughter of Zeus, hear my words and protect my young brother, Orestes. He is on his way to King Strophius. Watch over him. Prevent the murderers Aegisthus sent after him, from finding him. Protect him, help him grow to manhood and help him grow strong enough to return to Mycenae to purge this land of the murderers who now rule.

Enter CHORUS 1, dressed royally

ELECTRA (cont'd)

(Stands)

Do you know where they are?

CHORUS 1

I only saw one of them.

ELECTRA

Do you know where he is?

CHORUS 1

No, we led him to the northern gate. He was there, I could see him lurking in a shadow. After a while he saw we weren't moving anymore and he got closer, so I uncovered the young girl's head. When he realized his mistake, he gave up.

ELECTRA

Are you sure he left?

CHORUS 1

We waited and waited, but he didn't return, so I took the girl home and came here.

ELECTRA

Did he recognize you?

CHORUS 1

I don't think he was sure, not in these clothes. He tried to get close as he was following us, but we kept moving, though not rushing, as you said. He was more concerned with the child than with me. The girl was quiet and sensed the danger, but she didn't make a sound.

ELECTRA

Did he return to the palace?

CHORUS 1

I think he did. That was the direction he went.

Enter CHORUS 2, dressed royally

ELECTRA

Uh -- oh it's you. Were you followed?

CHORUS 2

Yes, there were two watching us that I saw.

ELECTRA

Did you make it to the east-southern gate?

CHORUS 2

Nearly. One gave up before the gate.

ELECTRA

And the other?

CHORUS 2

He followed close by, all the way to the gate.

CHORUS 1

Do you think they got away?

ELECTRA

That I'm not sure of. Perimedes is a loyal servant to my father and to Orestes. He will do what he can.

CHORUS 2

Were there only three of them then?

ELECTRA

Three men against one small boy. How can the gods stand for this?

CHORUS 1

Then he got away, if there weren't any more. I'm sure of it.

ELECTRA

We must return to the palace. We must not stir suspicion on a night such as this.

Exit ELECTRA, CHORUS 1 and CHORUS 2

THEOBALD

Don't write my book? You can't really mean that?

POPE

What if I do?

THEOBALD

But that's not possible.

POPE

It is, indeed, possible.

THEOBALD

Are ... are you that powerful?

POPE

Take a good look at me, Mr Theobald. What do you see?

THEOBALD

I see ... what I see.

POPE

Do you not see this twisted and bent body of mine?

THEOBALD

I, I wouldn't say it is --

POPE

Can this tiny frame you see before you, be deemed powerful?

THEOBALD

You are ... there are different ways of --

POPE

My body, Mr Theobald, does not offer physical strength.

THEOBALD

My intention was not to impune your --

POPE

My power does not come from my body -- but from my pen.

THEOBALD

Your pen?

POPE

Yes, my pen. My strength, my power comes from my words.

THEOBALD

Your words?

POPE

Yes, from my words, therein lies my power.

THEOBALD

What are you saying, Mr Pope?

POPE

My words are strong and they can be very powerful, when used in the proper way. My words, Mr Theobald, can introduce you to, and keep you in the most selective group of writers, poets and playwrights alive.

THEOBALD

Are you saying you would --

POPE

Write and praise your words.

THEOBALD
But --

POPE
And no one would know.

THEOBALD
No one?

POPE
No one.

THEOBALD
There are those who suspect you of --

POPE
I said, no one would know!

THEOBALD
What about my book? What about Shakespeare and his plays?

POPE
What about them? The public will still read them, will still see them, will still enjoy them.

THEOBALD
I don't know. I don't think so -- no, no I can't.

POPE
Yes, you can. It will be the most heroic thing you ever do.

THEOBALD
I'm terribly sorry, but Shakespeare's scripts are --

POPE
ALL I DID ... all I did was make Shakespeare more accessible.

THEOBALD
You made Shakespeare more confusing, Mr Pope.

POPE
I made him accessible for today's more sophisticated audiences.

THEOBALD
I agree, the English language has changed.

POPE
Changed! His phrasing, his grammar, his spelling!

THEOBALD
Yes, it can be difficult and awkward.

POPE
Incomprehensible is more like it.

THEOBALD
Not to William Shakespeare.

POPE
But he's not with us, so he can't tell us what he wrote.

THEOBALD
What if I can?

POPE
What if you can -- what?

THEOBALD
I am a lawyer, Mr Pope. I deal with older Elizabethan documents, such as wills and deeds.

POPE
No doubt you would.

THEOBALD
We in the law are taught Elizabethan Secretary Script to allow us to read those documents.

POPE
We are taking about William Shakespeare.

THEOBALD
So am I. His plays were printed in the older orthographic form. My understanding of Elizabethan Secretary Script allows me to better decipher these older and corrupt play texts.

POPE
That is a task no one shall accomplish.

THEOBALD
I can not agree with you, much can yet be discovered.

POPE
Shakespeare is dead. All anyone can do is dress him up.

THEOBALD
He is not a character in a play.
(Beat)
I have a friend who is prompter at Lincoln's Inn Fields.

POPE
The gentleman for whom you mistook me?

THEOBALD
Yes, Mr Stede.

POPE

What does he have to do with this?

THEOBALD

He has shared his firsthand knowledge of theatre with me.

POPE

The theatre has changed since Shakespeare's time.

THEOBALD

All the same, it is theatre, so certain things will happen.

POPE

The spellings are too corrupt, his grammar, his --

THEOBALD

Without doubt, corrupt and difficult to penetrate.

POPE

Mind-boggling, unfathomable, confounding is more like it!

Enter ELECTRA and CHORUS 1. Electra is dressed royally. Both are sewing

CHORUS 1

Is there no word yet?

ELECTRA

It is too soon. It is a long, long journey. The best we can hope for is no word of their capture.

CHORUS 1

I think, I hope --

ELECTRA

So do I. It is difficult to wait, but we had better get use to it. This will take much time and it will be difficult, more difficult if we are --

Enter CLYTEMNESTRA

CLYTEMNESTRA

Leave us!

CHORUS 1 gathers her sewing

CLYTEMNESTRA (cont'd)

NOW!

Exit CHORUS 1

CLYTEMNESTRA (cont'd)

Where is your brother?!

ELECTRA

I don't know. I've not seen him yet today.

CLYTEMNESTRA

He's not in the palace.

ELECTRA

Are you sure? You know how he likes to hide.

CLYTEMNESTRA

He is gone!

ELECTRA

He is probably scared. He will return, I'm sure of it.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Your king is displeased!

ELECTRA

My king is dead. You killed him last night. Don't you remember?

CLYTEMNESTRA

Your king is upset!

ELECTRA

My father is dead. You, my mother, killed him. The emotional state of your paramour doesn't interest me.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Don't fight me on this -- where is your brother?!

ELECTRA

No doubt someplace safer than this palace.

CLYTEMNESTRA

I know it was you. You were followed last night.

ELECTRA

I am in mourning. I never left the palace last night.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Aegisthus will not take this lightly.

ELECTRA

He will not take what lightly?

CLYTEMNESTRA

Your sneaking your brother out of the palace last night.

ELECTRA

So he couldn't kill him too?

CLYTEMNESTRA

He is your king! You will not speak of him like that!

ELECTRA

He killed my father. I will speak of him in any way I wish.

CLYTEMNESTRA

It's no matter. Your brother is of no concern. He is just a boy.

ELECTRA

Aegisthus too was once just a boy, but he grew to manhood and look at what treachery he is capable of now.

CLYTEMNESTRA

If you think this is a game?

ELECTRA

My father took you at your word, I'll not make the same mistake.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Where is your brother?

ELECTRA

I told you I've not seen him this day.

CLYTEMNESTRA

So, they were right, he escaped last night.

ELECTRA

Who was right?

CLYTEMNESTRA doesn't respond

ELECTRA (cont'd)

So you would kill your own son.

CLYTEMNESTRA doesn't respond

ELECTRA (cont'd)

Wherever my brother is, he is in a safer place than in his mother's arms.

CLYTEMNESTRA

You don't have the right to speak to me that way.

ELECTRA

I will speak to you in any way I want.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Your king will come to see you. You will not like it.
(Goes to leave)

ELECTRA
He needn't bother.

CLYTEMNESTRA
(Stops)
Where is your brother?

ELECTRA
Somewhere safer than Mycenae.

CLYTEMNESTRA
I want to know.

ELECTRA
Of course you do. If I were you, I too would be concerned.

CLYTEMNESTRA
You are spiteful!

ELECTRA
You are wicked.

CLYTEMNESTRA
You are impudent!

ELECTRA
I take after my mother.

CLYTEMNESTRA
You are ungrateful beyond belief.
(Goes to leave)

ELECTRA
I have sent Orestes away!

CLYTEMNESTRA
(Stops)
I know that. Where?

ELECTRA
Some place safe, where he can grow to manhood.

CLYTEMNESTRA
He'll not grow to manhood.

ELECTRA
Once he has grown to manhood, he will return to Mycenae to
avenge the death of his father and reclaim his throne.

CLYTEMNESTRA
Where is he?

ELECTRA
The gods know where he is.

CLYTEMNESTRA

The gods don't care.

ELECTRA

The gods will protect him. The gods will see he grows to manhood. The gods will see he returns to Mycenae.

CLYTEMNESTRA

He would not kill his own mother.

ELECTRA

He can and he will. I've no doubt the gods will see to it. And I will see to it.

CLYTEMNESTRA

You can not see to it.

ELECTRA

I can see to it and I will.

CLYTEMNESTRA

What will you do?

ELECTRA

I will ... why of course I will mourn.

CLYTEMNESTRA

You will mourn?

ELECTRA

Yes, I will mourn.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Mourning is good. You will need to do that.

ELECTRA

I will mourn. Yes, I will mourn long and hard. I will cry my lamentations until the day my brother returns to Mycenae. I will mourn with every ounce of my soul. I will mourn for the death of my father. I will mourn for all of Mycenae. I will sing dirges so loud the gods will hear! I will mourn so all of Mycenae will not forget this injustice! I will mourn long and hard so the gods will not forget the troubles that now haunt my father's house!

CLYTEMNESTRA

I will destroy you, if you do this.

ELECTRA

You will only destroy yourself.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Yours will be a woeful destiny. The blathering of your clamorous tongue will be forgotten. Your suffering and anguish will be scorned and laughed at.

ELECTRA

Maybe so, maybe not.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Your father did not deserve his crown -- he was a woeful dunce of a man!

ELECTRA

I will not fail my father.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Time will adjust your lamentations.

ELECTRA

To your oppression? I think not. Time will be kindly to me.

CLYTEMNESTRA

This will not be so!

ELECTRA

(Kneels before bust of Athena)

Oh, holy goddess Athena, hear me. This palace is haunted and betrayed. There is evil all around. Watch over Orestes. Help him as he grows to manhood. Help him grow strong and sturdy and wise. Steel his nerves. Prevent my mother from murdering her son. With all of your power Athena, protect Orestes. Help him return to Mycenae and reclaim our father's kingdom from the usurping murderers who now sit upon the throne.

Exit CLYTEMNESTRA. Enter CHORUS 1 with a wrap. SHE puts the wrap on Electra and helps her to her feet. THEY exit

THEOBALD

Mind-boggling the spellings may be, and yes the grammar can be confounding, Mr Pope -- but I can do this.

POPE

You can not. It is not possible!

THEOBALD

Indeed, there is no one in all of London who can do this better than can I.

POPE

No one will penetrate his meaning.

THEOBALD

I will. I will tell you and everyone else what he wrote.