



The Poet, the Astronomer, and the Light from the Moon

BY

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EXTRACT

A SMITH SCRIPT

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The Poet, the Astronomer, and the Light from the Moon

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Characters

A Young Man, English Tourist (John Milton)

An Elderly Italian (Galileo Galilei)

A Young Professional Italian Woman (Virginia, Galileo's daughter)

It should be noted that the identity of the characters is revealed during the course of the action; they are identified in the script for the clarity of the reader only.

Setting

Two gardens; a large garden in Florence and Galileo's garden in Arcetri.

Lines which are in capitals are to be spoken in Italian.

Time

The atmosphere or tone should be 17th Century; props and costumes should sit, as far as possible, outside any period of setting. Period neutral as far as possible.

Scene 1: A large garden in Florence; day.

Scene 2: Galileo's garden, a few days later.

Scene 3: Galileo's garden, the same day, evening.

Scene 4: Galileo's garden, a few days later, evening.

Scene 5: Galileo's garden, the same day, a few hours later, night.

Scene 6: Galileo's garden, the same day, a few moments later, night.

Scene 7: A large garden, as in Scene 1, two days after Scene 6, morning.

Psalms

Extracts of the seven Penitential Psalms, in my own versions, are included.

Galileo was required, after his statement to the Inquisition, to recite the seven psalms once a week for a year. In the play they reflect John Milton's state of mind. They also give us the chance for a moment's reflection, as well as giving time for the scene changes.

One

*Hear my prayer Lord
when I cry to you,
hold me close, Lord
when I fly to you,
raise me up, Lord
if I should die for you;
deliver me, Lord from my enemy's hand,
deliver me, Lord into your Promised Land.
(Psalm 143)*

[The terrace of a large garden. John, smartly dressed, though casual, is speaking with a young woman, Virginia. She is dressed in dark clothing – stylish, though serious.]

Virginia BUT WHY ITALIAN?

John MY FATHER THOUGHT IT A GOOD IDEA.

Virginia THAT'S NO ANSWER.

John IT'S A REASON.

Virginia POSSIBLY A GOOD ONE.

John IF YOU KNEW MY FATHER.

Virginia I like to speak English.

John I LIKE TO SPEAK ITALIAN.

Virginia It's important that the rest of the world understands that in Italy we understand there is a rest of the world.

John IN ENGLAND WE ARE AWARE THERE IS AN ITALY.

Virginia You are aware of it?

John Because we don't understand it.

Virginia OF COURSE. .

John I WOULDN'T SAY THERE'S AN 'OF COURSE'. IN FACT I MIGHT GO SO FAR AS TO SAY THAT MOST ENGLISHMEN ARE MOSTLY ONLY AWARE THAT GERMANY EXISTS, AND FRANCE, AND SPAIN. EVEN FLANDERS IN SOME CIRCUMSTANCES.

Virginia [Correcting him.] EVEN FLANDERS IN SOME CIRCUMSTANCES.

John EVEN FLANDERS IN SOME CIRCUMSTANCES. Just about.

Virginia But here you are.

John Studying your Florentine ways.

Virginia AN ADVENTURER.

John A student of life.

Virginia Quite a lot of the Englishmen I speak to are students of life.

John And the others?

Virginia Students of other things.

John I was a university student. Some years ago. At Cambridge.

Virginia How long have you been here . . . [Virginia is also fishing for his name.]

John Milton.

Virginia [Virginia continues to fish.]

John Milton. John Milton.

Virginia How do you do, Signor John Milton?

John How do you do? [He fishes now, but she isn't hooked.] Not long.

Virginia Just getting started.

John I'm leaving tomorrow.

Virginia Already bored with us specimens.

John I'm moving around.

Virginia In a hurry.

John Taking my time.

Virginia What do you think of our Florentine panorama?

John It's magnificent. Magnificently laid out.

Virginia I often sit here and think.

John About the panorama?

Virginia About life.

John A kindred student then?

Virginia Yes and no.

[Some bells ring.]

St Claire's.

John Time for prayer.

Virginia The sisters are allowed to speak. For an hour.

John I had an Aunt called Claire.

Virginia Was she saintly?

John Aunt Claire was far from saintly. What would it be like to fit everything you want to say into one hour each day. You'd have to select.

Virginia They mostly gossip.

John How weak is the human spirit.

Virginia Signor Milton, they select their gossip most carefully. Do you like what you see as you move around?

John You have a lot of history.

Virginia You have a lot of history.

John Ancient history.

Virginia So do you.

John But yours is real culture. Real beauty. The forms from ancient Roma. Atene.

Virginia Not Atene here, of course.

John Real art. Real knowledge.

Virginia Powerful knowledge. That shapes our thinking today.

John As the bed rock of your thinking.

Virginia It's that. But it isn't our thinking. It can't stand in place of our thinking.

John But it is the bed rock.

Virginia Perhaps you should visit one of the Academia. That's where a lot of our thinking is these days. Free thinking. Many of them welcome foreigners. AND YOU SPEAK ITALIAN EXTREMELY WELL FOR AN ENGLISH GENTLEMAN.

John I don't have time.

Virginia Try Academia degli Svogliati. Engage with us Florentines. You might get to like the place.

John Find the real Firenze.

Virginia When you find it let me know.

John I'm taking it in.

Virginia Passing through.

John I have to be in Roma. Then Atene.

Virginia You might get to like us.

John It's a funny thing, you know. My father used to take me to the theatre when I was a boy. He had shares in one. Italy is specially singled out as a place of corruption and vice. A place of great wickedness.

Virginia That's just to make England look better.

John A hot place of passion and revenge.

Virginia Yet he still thought you should learn Italian.

John He loved the plays. Actually one of his good friends is Italian and his son is my closest friend ever since we were at school.

Virginia So you speak Italian with your best friend?

John I speak better Italian than Charles.

Down there, the garden merges straight into the wild. A change in the landscape. It's beautiful. We don't get that in England. We like it one thing or the other.

Virginia It's all carefully planted. Planned and planted.

John Could have fooled me.

Virginia It's meant to. The landscape encapsulates nature and nurture. Not warring but working together. You are surprised by artifice?

John By art.

Virginia By art parading as nature. And although it's not what it seems, it gives us a truth, you see, about Time. If Truth is wrapped up in something that isn't a truth, Signor Milton, is it a lie?

John Or a truth perverted?

Virginia Or still a truth? Which is possibly more dangerous, because how could you tell one from the other?

John A lot to think about.

Virginia That's why I often sit here.

There is corruption in Italia. In Firenze, here; in Pisa, in Roma. Everywhere. Venezia.

John I'm sorry to hear it.

Virginia. And do your playwrights never gaze inward?

John What do you mean?

Virginia Surely England isn't free from corruption?

John We see it in surprising places.

Virginia Exactly where you'd expect to find it. And that's always a surprise.

John And where's that then?

Virginia You're the Englishman.

John What's the virtue of washing one's dirty linen in public?

Virginia What's the virtue of not washing it?

John Keeping out of trouble.

Virginia If my memory serves me correctly, you raised the subject.

John I was making a point.

Virginia And the point is?

John I love the warmth here. In England the weather is so often cold or wet. Or cold and wet. Here you can breathe deeply. Right in without fear of damaging your lungs.

Virginia Then stay a while.

John No.

Virginia Pay a call on the Academia degli Svogliati.

John I must move on.

Virginia What are you running away from?

John I'm not.

Virginia Then stand still. You're a young man; you shouldn't be in such a hurry so stand still and enjoy your deep breaths. Don't believe what your playwrights tell you. They tell lies. All the time. All play makers are liars. Lies are their stock in trade. Lies and truth, and truth and lies. They can't tell the difference. We take deep breaths in Italia and feel all the better for it. All the time.

John Don't playwrights hold up a mirror? Of one sort or another.

Virginia There's nothing special about a mirror. I'll get you five or six if you like. In Firenze we we've better things for unveiling secrets. A new instrument that reveals things beyond our world. Invented in Firenze. I could introduce you to the inventor if you like.

John I don't think so.

Virginia You might enjoy speaking with him.

John Isn't he in trouble?

Virginia The trouble will all be resolved in due course.

John He didn't invent it.

Virginia You know who I'm talking about.

John Galileo Galilei.

Virginia You're a good student.

John Of life. Not always at Cambridge.

Virginia So you know of Signor Galilei's studies?

John Trying to work out what makes the tides work.

Virginia He has an interesting mind.

John A dangerous mind.

Virginia An open mind. You'd enjoy talking with him.

John I'm not seeking out controversy.

Virginia What's controversial about the tides?

John There's nothing controversial about the tides. Tides ebb and flow because tides ebb and flow. It's life. A fact of life. It is as it is. What's there to explain? Things happen because they happen. We don't know why, we can't explain it. Sometimes it's dangerous to want to know too much.

Virginia Why not take a walk in our beautiful garden down there. Our beautiful nurtured natural garden.

John Maybe.

Virginia It's a little cooler now.

John Yes.

Virginia Maybe we'll talk again.

John That would be pleasant, but I'm afraid . . .

Virginia Firenze is a small place.

John Academia degli Svogliati.

Virginia Via del Giglio. You'll find them. Jocoppo Gaddi.

John Will you walk in the garden?

Virginia Work to do.

John Of course.

Virginia A PRIOR ENGAGEMENT.

John OF COURSE.

Virginia It's been nice chatting.

John Thank you.

[Virginia leaves. Then John moves, perhaps into the wilder part of the garden.]

*My Lord, I know I am weak
and my actions have drawn us apart,
my senses are dim
unhappiness in my heart.
My friends have parted from me
their warmth turned to stone;
my **enemies** multiply round me
I am alone.
(Psalm 38)*

* * *

Two

[Galileo, in working clothes, is bolting together a right angle of two trellises. A wheelbarrow is nearby with a few tools in it, maybe some plants. John makes his way into the garden.]

John HELLO.

Galileo Good afternoon. Can I help?

John I'M LOOKING FOR VINCENZO.

Galileo He's not here.

John You speak English?

Galileo So it would seem.

John How did you know I was English?

Galileo You're not very good at disguise.

John I'm not trying to - . Is Signor Galilei here?

Galileo Vincenzo?

John He.

Galileo No.

John Ah.

Galileo You came out here to see him?

John I did.

Galileo Did you walk?

John It was pleasant.

Galileo On your own?!

John It's not far.

Galileo Hold this up straight for me.

John Me?

Galileo You won't get dirty.

John Isn't there . . . ?

Galileo You'll do fine.

John Is there someone I could leave a message with? For Signor Galilei?

Galileo For Vincenzo?

John Yes.

Galileo Me?

John Will you make sure he gets it?

Galileo I'll do my best.

John If . . . ?

Galileo Hold it steady. Don't know when he'll get it mind. Flitting about. Here one minute, gone the next. No respect.

John He arranged to meet me here.

Galileo It's how the young are. Is it the same in England?

John I think not.

Galileo Proper respect for your elders and betters; good to hear.

John How long have you worked here?

Galileo In the garden?

John Yes.

Galileo Oh years. Years and years.

John I see.

Galileo But I do other things.

John A handyman.

Galileo This and that.

John You're changing it all around?

Galileo You have to move with the times. Used to be all open. You could see it all in one go. Before. Now it's all for closing it down. A series of changing experiences. Not a place anymore for static contemplation. Now it's meditation on the move. Time passing.

John A philosophical gardener.

Galileo A practical one more like. That's got it.

John I've never helped in a garden before.

Galileo Travel broadens your horizons. You can let go now.

[Virginia comes in.]

Virginia THIS IS COMING ALONG WELL.

Galileo GOOD AFTERNOON, MY DEAR.

John GOOD AFTERNOON. WHAT A SURPRISE.

Virginia Signor Milton. So we meet again.

John I was looking for Signor Galilei.

Virginia But you –

Galileo Vincenzo.

John Then I had to help your gardener.

Virginia There's an unexpected surprise.

John I took your advice. Went along to one of the Academia. Stimulating; you were right.

Virginia Vincenzo arranged to meet you here.

John At six.

Galileo ANYONE'D THINK HE HADN'T LEARNED TO TELL THE TIME.

Virginia His timekeeping's not good, I'm afraid.

Galileo I'LL GO OVER HERE, MISS.

Virginia WHAT FOR?

Galileo SPOT OF URGENT WEEDING. The only thing that spread faster than Italian weeds are Florentine gossip.

[Galileo wanders away a little.]

John A most philosophical gardener.

Virginia You shouldn't believe everything you see. YOU'RE AN OLD ROGUE. Signor Milton, let me introduce Galileo Galilei.

Galileo A philosopher at your service. And a gardener. WELCOME TO THE GALILEO HOME.

John Oh! Oh I . . . PLEASE EXCUSE ME.

Galileo I encouraged you.

John Quite inexcusable.

Galileo 'Who could I leave a message with?'

Virginia You're incorrigible.

John I must apologise.

Galileo Good to have a free conversation.

John I'm not sure . . .

Galileo We were getting on very well.

Virginia He'll lead you astray.

John I should go.

Galileo I'll be offended.

John Really . . .

Galileo It's hot. I'll see if I can rustle us up some drinks.

[Galileo goes to get some.]

John I think I should go.

Virginia Don't rush off. He doesn't get many visitors these days. At the moment.

John I understand.

Virginia The Church doesn't like it.

John I UNDERSTAND.

Virginia He used to have people around him all the time.

John I've been finding out about his work.

Virginia Word spreads.

John Some of it's very difficult to understand.

Virginia Not when he explains it.

John I'm sure.

Virginia Ask him.

John I thought . . .

Virginia He'll debate it as an idea.

John And that's alright?

Virginia It makes it easier. Don't worry, you'll be fine. Besides, you come from a nation of heretics.

John [Makes no response to this, though he's clearly uncomfortable.]

Virginia You don't answer that?

John It's better that way.

Virginia What made you change your mind? About the Academy?

John Curiosity.

Virginia An excellent quality.

John Unless you're a cat.

Virginia [She doesn't understand.]

John AN ENGLISH PROVERB. CURIOSITY KILLED THE CAT.