

# THE KING'S HENCHMAN

A Play in Three Acts

by Edna St. Vincent Millay,



HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS  
NEW YORK AND LONDON  
MCMXXVII

THE KING'S HENCHMAN  
COPYRIGHT, 1927,  
BY EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY  
PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.  
L-B

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

First Printing February 1927  
Second Printing February 1927  
Third Printing February 1927  
Fourth Printing March 1927  
Fifth Printing March 1927  
Sixth Printing April 1927  
Seventh Printing May 1927  
Eighth Printing June 1927  
Ninth Printing July 1927  
Tenth Printing August 1927  
Eleventh Printing September 1927  
Twelfth Printing September 1927  
Thirteenth Printing November 1927  
Fourteenth Printing November 1927  
Fifteenth Printing November 1927

*THE KING'S HENCHMAN*

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE HARP-WEAVER AND OTHER POEMS

RENASCENCE AND OTHER POEMS

A FEW FIGS FROM THISTLES

SECOND APRIL



ARIA DA CAPO

TWO SLATTERNS AND A KING

THE LAMP AND THE BELL

THREE PLAYS





# THE KING'S HENCHMAN

*A Play in Three Acts*

TIME: Tenth Century

PLACE: England

## PERSONS

EADGAR, King of England  
DUNSTAN, Archbishop of Canterbury  
ÆTHELWOLD, Earl of East Anglia, foster-brother and  
friend to Eadgar

ORDGAR, Thane of Devon

GUNNER

CYNRIC

BRAND

INGILD

WULFRED

OSLAC

} Lords at the Hall of King Eadgar

MACCUS, servant and friend to Æthelwold

THORED, Master-of-the-Household to Ordgar

HWITA, Cup-bearer to the King

A BLACKSMITH

A SADDLER

A MILLER

A FISHERMAN

ANOTHER FISHERMAN

AN OLD MAN

ÆLFRIDA, Daughter to Ordgar

HILDEBURH

OSTHARU

GODGYFU

LEOFSYDU

MERWYNNA

} Ladies at the Hall of King Eadgar

ASE, servant to Ælfrida

ENID, wife of Thored

A BLACKSMITH'S WIFE

A MILLER'S WIFE

A FISHERMAN'S WIFE

A NEAT-HERD'S WIFE

A WOMAN-SERVANT

ANOTHER WOMAN-SERVANT

A YOUNG GIRL

WYNNA, a child, daughter of Thored

Other lords and ladies, attendants, cup-bearers, villagers,  
fishermen, etc.



# THE KING'S HENCHMAN

## ACT I

[Hall of KING EDGAR at Winchester. A great room of gray stone, with small windows deep-set in the wall, and massive doors. On one side of the room, at the spectator's left, stands a long table of oak, roughly carved, at the further end of which is a handsome, high-backed wooden settle, and along the sides of which run wooden benches without backs. In the middle of the room a fire of logs is burning on a round open grate of blackened stones; this fire has been burning for a long time; the logs are thin in the middle, and glow from end to end. There is no chimney; the smoke is left to find its way out through cracks in the ceiling and doors. Near the fire is a wooden settle. In the right wall there is a door leading out to the stables. In the center of the back wall is a broad double door leading into the courtyard.]



## THE KING'S HENCHMAN

*It is five o'clock of a morning about the end of September. Through the thick glass of the small windows a pale daylight enters, but makes little headway in the room, which is lighted now by tall rush torches, and by a double row of candles running the length of the table. The table is laden with a variety of meats and loaves on heavy trenchers, together with cups and goblets, mostly of horn, some few of thick glass. Everything is in that disorder which attends the end of a banquet: goblets overturned, dripping mead upon the hard earth of the floor; a boar's head with little to identify it but the two strong tusks; remnants of pig and venison; bag puddings; wild-honey combs; and rinds and scraps of white and yellow cheese.*

*At the head of the table, on the high-backed settle, sits KING EADGAR, a dark man, short, stockily built, with a handsome head, black hair, and a black beard. He is less than twenty-five years old, but his thoughtful face, grave eyes, and dignified bearing give him the appearance of being somewhat older; he has been a king for ten years, and shows it.*

*On the right of EADGAR is seated DUNSTAN, Archbishop of Canterbury, a man of forty, clean-shaven, with a pale face and bright gray eyes, wearing his house cassock, a black robe with purple at the neck.*

## THE KING'S HENCHMAN

*During most of the act DUNSTAN talks to EADGAR earnestly.*

*On DUNSTAN'S right sits BRAND; on BRAND'S right GUNNER, a slim, worldly man, with a keen, gay face.*

*On EADGAR'S left is a vacant place. Next the vacant place is OSLAC, a fat fellow, sound asleep, with his head on the table.*

*At the foot of the table are two places; that on the right is vacant; the other is occupied by INGILD, a big man with blue eyes and a rick of red hair. The other places are filled by CYNRIC, WULFRED,—a round-faced boy of sixteen, who has already swung his ax against the Danes in Yorkshire—and several other lords, in various stages of intoxication,—one sleepy, another sad, another argumentative.*

*Nearly all present are men between the ages of sixteen and thirty; in these times only yokels lived to grow old. They are dressed for the most part in skins, with kilts and sleeveless jackets of rough woolen stuff, and hose strapped from ankle to knee with deerskin thongs. EADGAR is dressed much like the others, except for a cloth cape heavily embroidered in rich colors, which is fastened at his shoulder by an enamel brooch, and a signet-ring of heavy gold.*

*On the right side of the room, not seated, but leaning*

## THE KING'S HENCHMAN

against the doorway or half-sitting in the window recess, is a group of ladies, several of them wives of lords at the table. The matrons may be distinguished from the maidens by the fact that their hair, in the few instances when it is not hidden under a cap, is seen to be cut short; the unmarried women wear their hair down their backs, usually in two braids, and no cap, but only a narrow fillet about the forehead.

The ladies are not guests at the feast, but have been permitted to steal in to hear the songs of the harper. They keep themselves well in the background, not timorously, but as a matter of course, whispering among themselves. One or two have embroidery frames; when nothing else is going forward to arrest their attention, they bend their heads and stitch.

At the rise of the curtain **MACCUS**, trusty servant and true friend of **Æthelwold**, and also the most skillful and beloved harper for many shires about, is seated on a stool in the center of the stage, singing to the accompaniment of his harp. He is a man whose life has miraculously been preserved to the age of nearly fifty, scarred with battle wounds, with grizzled hair and beard and a rich, deep voice. He has been singing for over an hour the familiar and favorite saga of the glory and death of **Cynewulf**, King of **Wessex** long

## THE KING'S HENCHMAN

*ago, who, under cover of darkness, was treacherously put to death at the door of his mistress by a rival for the throne. All faces, save those of Oslac and one or two others, sunken in sleep, are turned earnestly toward MACCUS. The men lean forward across the table, their fists clenched, their jaws set; the women stand with their hands clutched to their breasts or hovering at their lips, in rapt and passionate attention.]*

### MACCUS

*[Singing to the accompaniment of a harp]*

Wild as the white waves

Rushing and roaring, Heaving the wrack  
High up the headland; Hoarse as the howling  
Winds of the winter, When the lean wolves  
Harry the hindmost, Horseman and horse  
Topped and tumbled; So at the town gate,  
Stroke upon stroke, Sledging and slaying,  
Swashes the sword, Shivers the shield  
Of foeman and kinsman: Such was the fight!  
But lustless and lank By the bower of the Lady,  
Quenchèd forever, Quellèd and cold,  
Cynewulf the King!

# THE KING'S HENCHMAN

## LADIES

Woe-worth-the-day!

## LORDS

*[Beating the table]*

Ho! Ho! Ho!

Maccus, man! Maccus! Maccus!

## THE LADY OSTHARU

Oh, sorrow! Oh, sorrow!

## BRAND

Those were the days!

I tell you, take it deep and shoal,

Those were the days!

## THE LADY HILDEBURH

Weep, weep for Cynewulf, wretched King!

## CYNRIC

Mark ye, not a man of all his men

Was handy to help him!

## GUNNER

Not they, the fat swine! Rooting in the kitchen .  
for mast!

Nuzzling i' the mash-vat!

## THE LADY GODGYFU

Now hath his Lady a bitter burthen to thole!

## THE KING'S HENCHMAN

### LADIES

Yea, so! Yea, so!

### LORDS

*[Beating the table]*

Maccus, man! Maccus! Maccus!  
Ho!

### LORDS AND LADIES

*[Singing]*

Be the day far off,  
O Harper!  
When thy harp is unstrung!  
Far off! Far off!  
Be that day,  
O Singing Man!  
Far off, O Harper!  
When thy harp is unstrung!  
And thy hand still!  
And thy song sung!

### KING EADGAR

Now, by the mead of Odin, a good tale, mightily  
told!  
Come hither, Maccus, and slake thee!  
Thou hast a throat like a corn kiln, or I'm a  
Welshman.

THE KING'S HENCHMAN

If but thy belly be as deep as thy lung,  
Thou wilt not spit i' the cup.  
Hwita! A stoup here!

Lord, and how sorrow-sweet, for all thy manly  
wounds,  
Thou sangest the white Lenten-tide,  
And lover from his leman sundered,—  
Thou bearded nightingale!

MACCUS

It was the harp that sang, O Shield of Albion;  
Not I.

*[He returns to his seat beside INGILD, at the foot of the table. HWITA fills a goblet for the King, then a cup for MACCUS. Other cup-bearers go the rounds of the table.]*

CYNRIC

Ho, Oslac!  
Thou'lt fall into thy cup!

GUNNER

No fear, my friend:  
The cup has long since fallen into Oslac.  
*[Laughter from the others]*

THE KING'S HENCHMAN

OSLAC

*[Waking up, drunkenly]*

Where's Æthelwold?

BRAND

Hast thou looked under the board for him?

GUNNER

*Under the board? He cannot see above it,  
From where he sits!*

*[Roars of laughter]*

WULFRED —

Let 'em not feaze thee, Oslac, my lad; sleep on.

*[The lords continue to laugh and jest among themselves.  
On the other side of the room the ladies are gossiping.]*

THE LADY HILDEBURH

*[To GODGYFU]*

Who is the woman, then?

GODGYFU

*[A dark, handsome girl, more than a little in love  
with the King]*

Good shrift, I know not!



## THE KING'S HENCHMAN

OSTHARU

[*Looking up from her embroidery*]

The woman is daughter to Ordgar, Thane of Devon.  
“Ælfrida,” she hight.

GODGYFU

I wonder the King sendeth not to Damascus for his  
bride!

Why stand at Devon?

HILDEBURH

'Tis said she is rankly fair.

GODGYFU

'Tis said of others.

OSTHARU

And I ween the chest of silver mancuses  
Beside her father's bed  
Doth not bedim her, neither.

HILDEBURH

Is he so rich in silver, the old man?

OSTHARU

Dear lady, he dare not stand too nigh the fire,  
Lest he melt in his hose  
And come out candlesticks!

[*They all titter for a moment at the picture thus presented, all except GODGYFU.*]