Ars Amatoria

by lorannah

Summary

Tranio is trapped, Bianca is lonely and Lucentio is in love.

Notes

I wanted to write this as a fun, silly romp but this spilled out instead. Forgive me.

Many thanks to Arithanas for a wonderful beta, all errors and anachronisms remaining are my own.

See the end of the work for more notes

“And I am tied to be obedient;
For so your father charged me at our parting,
’Be serviceable to my son,’ quoth he,
Although I think ’twas in another sense.”
- William Shakespeare, The Taming of The Shrew, Act 1, Scene 1

“You seek to leave our employ, friend Tranio?”

Tranio could not avoid the chill shudder that ran along his neck, engrossed in his paper; he had not heard his master’s approach. He resisted the urge to crumple the printed pages, but instead, lowered his hand which had been hovering, pen in place above a job listing. Standing quickly.
him no friend.

“I fear being companioned to a child is a service where the paths before you dwindle and not increase - until but one is left and that is short,” he told Vicentio, trying to keep any note of bitterness from entering his tone.

“It is a cruel thing to be enriched with knowledge, but to possess not the wit or wealth to wear it,” Vicentio surveyed him, dismissively for a moment. “I wish to speak to you of my son.”

“Yes, my lord.”

It was no surprise that Lucentio should be the reason for this visitation; he could not recall the last time they had spoken of anything else. Unless it had been when he was summoned to Vicentio’s study to be delivered, in terse tones, news of his mother’s death.

“My son lacks a wife. It is a deficiency I can no longer find it in myself to ignore.”

Tranio made no reply and Vicentio in silence, walked to the window, looking out across his grand estate. After a long pause he turned again to look upon him. Eyes tracking him from head to toe. Weighing him and finding him wanting.

“Have you noticed nothing in the meddling boys that so delight my son?”

“Nay, my lord,” Tranio lied, fearful of what reprimand awaited.

“Should I set each of them before you, like a glass, it would only be the small particulars that would prove the real Tranio. The wrong eye colour or a mole upon a brow. Each night he fashions you anew in some boys face and takes you to his bed. Can you deny it?”

For all his care and innocence in Lucentio’s regard, his own guilt had been writ upon those boys’ faces.

“I have not encouraged this fascination, my lord.”

“And so it grew, unnourished it has thrived and for your glories,” Vicentio sneered at the word and stepped closer to him, so they stood face to face, “he will not turn his eye to any maid.”

“I cannot change that, I have tried,” Tranio fought down the frustration and annoyance burning in his stomach.

Lucentio’s love had shone pure, and true, and constant in his life as far backwards as his memory could stretch; and in other circumstances, other days, and other lives, Tranio knew he would have succumbed to it. And yet he hadn’t. Instead he had snuck out into the night and tumbled other lads and other lasses, secretly, and both Lucentio and he had pretended that nothing but brotherhood lay between them.

“Then try a different way, a different path. If your disdain does not drive him to a wife, be not the rod,” Vicentio suddenly gripped his chin, forcing his head back slightly. “But the bait – lead him to a fair and honest maid. Make yourself his prize. Woo him, for if reports prove true you have more than a little art in that matter.”

He squeezed his chin firmer, pain biting like a wolf at Tranio’s jaw. Vicentio leant in closer, so that he might whisper in his ear.

“This is a rare offer I make you, for I will turn a blind eye to this dalliance if it prove fruitful. Think of this a hidden path, sea sunk and treacherous - as I, the tide, withdraws, it opens to you.
Cross quickly, secure yourself and more ways will open before you. What say you?"

Vicentio released him, smooth and unruffled again, and Tranio staggered back a step. As all conversations with Vicentio proved, this felt like a test. A trap.

“Once the match is made, what then? Your blindness forgotten? This will break his heart.”

Vicentio shrugged. “My son securely wedded and bedded, and should you choose to leave, I will release you with healthy dividends, your debt to my family forgotten; choose that not, my son’s own generosity shall prove reward enough. You will go with Lucentio to Padua. Be serviceable to my son.”

Without pause he left the room. Alone, Tranio sank back into his seat and stared for a moment at his clenched fist. The remnants of paper still caught within his blood and ink stained fingers.

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"He lays out oar-like wings with lines of feathers, and ties the fragile work with fastenings of string, and glues the ends with beeswax melted in the flames, and now the work of this new art’s complete. Laughing, his son handled the wax and feathers not knowing they were being readied for his own shoulders."
- Ovid, Ars Amatoria, II.1

Lucentio found he dared not move, so gently had Tranio’s head fallen upon his own shoulder, lulled by the gentle rhythm of the train. The neon orange of the unknown city’s lights blinking in warm shudders across them both. Like the light of a fitful fire. His breathing soft and so close that Lucentio could feel it tenderly against his cheek. A soft warmth in the cold privacy of their compartment.

Close enough that he could focus on the soft shadow cast by Tranio’s pale lashes. The shadow flickered for a second and Tranio’s eyes opened but a hands breadth from his own. Eyes more familiar to him than his father’s or his own, his constant companion for twenty or more years.

He could recall that first sweet meeting still, though he had been but five and Tranio still a babe. His eyes had been green and Lucentio had deemed him perfect. Neither the eyes nor his opinion had dimmed in the passing years, but instead had flared brighter with each day.

Tranio did not flinch to find them sat so close, did not move at all and for a moment they just gazed at each other. Carefully, fearful of scaring away this strange apparition, Lucentio raised his hand and brushed a thumb softly along his cheek. Turning, Tranio pressed his lips softly against the palm of his hand and almost without thought; Lucentio tipped his head back and kissed his lips. Warmth flooded through him as Tranio jerked backwards, pulling away from Lucentio’s lips and hands, his body trembling.

“Tranio?” Lucentio asked, pleading, reaching out to brush his fingers through the boy’s now messy hair. But Tranio shied away from the touch and slipped instead, unreachable, into the seat opposite.
“For all the love I bare you, master, this we must not do,” Tranio told him, not able to meet his eyes, even less able to quell the shaking of his fingers.

“What love you bare me, if it burdens you, set it aside. Cast off weary cares, for I would have you always free and light,” Lucentio told him, trying to quench his stirred hopes. He pushed himself from his seat, sinking to his knees at Tranio’s feet and taking both his hands, wrapped his own around them. Willing them to warm.

“Believe you that you are so carelessly cast off, my lord?”

“No lord, but a simple servant in my heart to cast aside at leisure.”

Tranio pulled one of his hands free, though he left the other tangled in the nest of Lucentio’s fingers, pressing the freed against Lucentio’s chest, above where his heart beat faster.

“If you were but married...” He sighed, the words trailing away.

“Is marriage not a burden to love,” Lucentio asked confused, lost in all ways. “To be avoided, not encouraged? A wife it seems would set a barrier, not remove one.”

“Your father is the barrier I think upon, he sits betwixt us,” Tranio’s eyes were intense. “Whilst his inheritance remains uncertain, his line unprofitable, he will brook no dalliance - no distraction. Should I prove such, I will be cast out, unhonoured and bereft.”

“Not in mine own affections.”

“But your affections, wealth as they are, cannot keep me - not whilst your father live and he is hale and hearty. Many years still wait to pass before him. Before us. A wife, should she be willing - would ease his fears and lend our love swift footed grace.”

“And would you love me, Tranio, should I be wifed?” Lucentio asked, an indistinct fear gripping at his heart, still beating beneath Tranio’s fingers.

There was something hidden under these words, an echo of his father’s voice and noting the shadow of a bruise on the boy’s chin, he wondered again what had passed between them in the secret, closed door conversation, he was not to have known.

“Aye, my Lord, most dearly.”

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“And for I know she taketh most delight
In music, instruments and poetry...”
- William Shakespeare, Taming of the Shrew, Act 1, Scene 1

Bianca stretched a leg upwards, enjoying the warm, illicit breeze against her bare legs, skirts gathered around her waist - secure in the seclusion of her balcony. It was thick with plants, trailing tendrils creeping around the metal bars and the air was heavy with the scent of laden blossoms. Head pillowed upon one arm, she held the book between herself and the sun.
It was her favourite place to read, amongst the scent and silence of the flowers, the arguing of her father and sister diminished to an indistinct murmur. The solitude of the poet’s words and her hidden place, calling to her own loneliness.

‘Now she shines among Lydian women like
the rose-fingered moon
rising after sundown, erasing all
stars around her, and pouring light equally
across the salt sea
and over densely flowered fields
lucent under dew. Her light spreads
on roses and tender thyme
and the blooming honey-lotus.’

“... for the great desire I had to see fair Padua,” the voice filtered through to Bianca in her wild bower, distracting her from the poetry, “Nursery of arts, I am arrived for fruitful Lombardy, the pleasant garden of great Italy.”

The voice was northern, youthful and top full of enthusiasm.

“And by my father’s love and leave am arm’d with his good will and thy good company, my trusty servant, well approved in all. Here let us breathe and haply institute a course of learning and ingenious studies.”

Curious, Bianca rolled sideways and abandoning her book, pushed aside the green and leafy curtain, to spy the interlopers below. The speaker she saw first, his hair dark, his clothes scruffy, a scarf of the student sort looped round his neck, and his face animated and pleasing. Loping around the square beneath her balcony like a month whelped pup. Exploring every corner. He paused for a moment, leaning against one of the statues standing beside the still pool and gazed back at his companion, lingering just beyond her sight.

“And therefore, Tranio,” he continued, “for the time I study, virtue and that part of philosophy will I apply that treats of happiness by virtue specially to be achieved.”

The other boy, Tranio, at last stepped into view, in build and height the mirror of the first, though he was pale and blonde, his clothes less wealthy but better considered and his manner calm against the other’s frenzy. He stopped, leaning against the same statue, the first boy fixed upon him with a steady adoration that Bianca had seen only reflected before in other girl’s eyes.

“Tell me thy mind,” the first boy continued softer, “for I have Pisa left and am to Padua come, as he that leaves a shallow plash to plunge him in the deep and with satiety seeks to quench his thirst.”

“Mi perdonato, gentle master mine, I am in all affected as yourself,” as Tranio spoke, not quite looking at the boy beside him, his master’s hand sought out his own, lacing their fingers together and lifting it, pressed his lips against his servant’s hand. Bianca felt a shiver run through her in the small intimacy of the moment and her own, secret, inclusion.

“Glad that you thus continue your resolve to suck the sweets of sweet philosophy. Only, good master, while we do admire this virtue and this moral discipline, let’s be no stoics nor no stocks.”

“Bianca!” Her father’s call within, shattered the sweet reverie of the moment, and reluctantly she let the leafy curtain fall and sitting, rearranged her skirts into a more demure arrangement.
Her father appeared in her balcony doorway and below she heard, or perhaps imagined, the sound of the two boys breaking apart.

“Have you been reading all this while?” Her father asked, “I have been calling you. We are again beset, your courters knocking at our gate and your audience required.”

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“Delude only women, if you’re wise, with impunity: where truth’s more to be guarded against than fraud. Deceive deceivers: for the most part an impious tribe: let them fall themselves into the traps they’ve set.”
- Ovid, Ars Amatoria, I.XVI

Tranio was grateful for the distraction of the warring pageant, for the distance it placed between him and Lucentio, sat now a short space away. The gap between them eased the guilty ache that had settled upon him, intensified with each of Lucentio’s heedful caresses.

“That wench is stark mad or wonderful froward,” he commented to Lucentio softly.

“But in the other’s silence do I see maid’s mild behaviour and sobriety. Peace, Tranio!”

Lucentio directed his gaze to the younger daughter, stood mildly behind her father - her eyes fixed upon them both. She met Tranio’s gaze with an almost breathtaking steadiness and it was he, blinking, looked away first.

“Well said, master, mum! And gaze your fill,” he murmured turning his attention, self-consciously, back to the father. Now looking at the younger girl himself with deep adoration.

“Gentlemen, that I may soon make good. What I have said, Bianca, get you in: and let it not displease thee, good Bianca, for I will love thee ne’er the less, my girl.”

“A pretty peat! It is best put a finger in the eye, an she knew why,” the elder sister swore.

“Sister,” the girl, Bianca, said softly, clearly conscious of her extended audience, “Content you in my discontent. Sir, to your pleasure humbly I subscribe: my books and instruments shall be my company, on them to look and practice by myself.”

“Hark, Tranio,” Lucentio said with artful breathlessness, watching him eagerly for a second before forcing his attention back to Bianca, “thou may’st hear Minerva speak.”

He watched as at her father’s bid, she turned and trailed inside, pausing in the doorway to spare them one last backwards glance as the men briefly argued on.

“Schoolmasters will I keep within my house, fit to instruct her youth. If you, Hortensio, or Signior Gremio, you know any such, prefer them hither; for to cunning men I will be very kind, and liberal to mine own children in good bringing up. And so farewell, Katherina, you may stay; for I have more to commune with Bianca.”

The father left, followed by his squabbling daughter, though it was not until the suitors too had
fled that Lucentio tried to capture Tranio’s eye, his excitement clear.

“I pray, sir,” Tranio asked carefully, “Tell me is it possible that love should of a sudden take such hold?”

“O Tranio, till I found it to be true, I never thought it possible or likely; but see, while idly I stood looking on, I found the effect of love in idleness,” Lucentio told him in an ecstasy of giddiness, leaping to his feet and in a moment, gripping Tranio’s hand, pulled him, spinning after him.

“And now,” Lucentio laughed slowing to a halt, “In plainness do confess to thee, that art to me as secret and as dear as Anna to the Queen of Carthage was.”

It was an ominous comparison, tinged with despair and death, sending a shiver of dread down Tranio’s spine, though Lucentio, caught up in his excitement still, seemed not to note it.

“Tranio,” he said, standing too close for a public place, pressing them both together as his hands cradled Tranio’s neck, eyes fixed brightly on his own, “I burn, I pine, I perish, Tranio. If I achieve not this young modest girl. Counsel me, Tranio, for I know thou canst; Assist me, Tranio, for I know thou wilt.”

Though all his instincts screamed against the hurried, faithless match, Tranio nodded. Pressing down against his guilt as they made their plans, turning his better thoughts from the future and ignoring the way Lucentio’s fingers still lingered against his skin as they changed garments. Or the casual, unthoughtful, way he with a single word cast him down again, transformed into Biondello’s rank and fellow.

These doubts would soon be gone and he, transformed to Tranio again, conscience and being free. And future undecided.

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“This young scholar, that hath been long studying at Rheims; as cunning in Greek, Latin, and other languages, as the other in music and mathematics: his name is Cambio; pray, accept his service.”

- William Shakespeare, The Taming of the Shrew, Act 2, Scene 1

Lucentio felt a momentary flight of panic within his chest, replaced almost instantly with curiosity, as he stepped inside the sanctum of his new sworn love. She was curled upon a couch, a book in her lap and several more discarded at her bare feet. As he entered, she looked up and the annoyance on her face at being disturbed was replaced by a silent ‘oh’ of surprise. Despite himself, he could not but think her exquisite.

In the other room, a trembling jangle of notes announced the music lesson’s start.

“I have been sent by Signior Gremio and... and your father,” he said, stumbling upon his words, “To teach you Greek and Latin... and poetry. Philosophy too.”

He stepped forward, further into the room though she did not bid him and tripping, sent the pile of books tumbling to the floor. Dropping to his knees he swore and immediately flushed, guiltily
looking up to meet his mistress’ eyes. She stifled a laugh and gracefully joined him on the floor, helping him to gather the books again, fingers gently brushing against his own.

“What must I call you, my lord?” She asked

“Nay, lady,” he told her, “I am no lord, but call me only your own Cambio. Do I please you?”

“I might wish a lesser man was sent, but, aye, my Cambio, you may please me.”

From the other room the sound of an argument erupted and Bianca laughed again, her smile welcoming him. He was no fool, but the world held him a deep romantic and he knew that for Tranio’s love he would have conquered dragons. Yet Bianca was no dragon and sat together on the ground, surrounded by their scattered books and her scattered laughter, Lucentio felt himself warm to the task before him.

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“And when wine has soaked Cupid’s drunken wings, he’s stayed, weighed down, a captive of the place. It’s true he quickly shakes out his damp feathers: though still the heart that’s sprinkled by love is hurt.”
- Ovid, Ars Amatoria, I.VII

Bianca felt that she had fallen into a fairy story, where all truths had been set falsely anew; that she had strayed onto a darken wooded path - her steps and part still unknown. That ‘Cambio’s’ intent was to woo, was clear enough. As too the appearance of his man, now playing some rich son of Pisa, come to court her father. But why their garb they’d swapped and why such roles taken or why they’d seek to add her to their tightly woven bands, she could not tell.

Yet now, sat close, a book within his hands, and Hortensio, in his fools disguise banished to the other room, she thought she might yet learn the truth.

“Construe them,” she told him, hopeful that he would read the secret meaning in her words. He looked at her for a second, nervous, and then nodding sank his eyes back to the book.

“‘Hic ibat Simois,’ - I am Lucentio – ‘hic est,’ - son unto Vincentio of Pisa – ‘Sigeia tellus,’ - disguised thus to get your love; – ‘Hic steterat,’ - and that Lucentio that comes a-wooing – ‘Priami,’ - is my man Tranio – ‘regia,’ - bearing my port – ‘celsa senis,’ - that we might

beguile the old pantaloon,” he stumbled on the words but at the end smiled up at her with a wry embarrassment and shyness.

It was the smile, more than the explanation, that Bianca found softening her heart but, still, she sat silently for a moment. Considering her answer. Lucentio’s hand, loosed from the book, crept closer to hers, resting upon the chair, until but one finger touched her own. She turned to look at him, and found that where she looked, she wished to kiss, for a moment caught in the romance of the story.

“Madam, my instrument’s in tune,” Hortensio said, interrupting the spell and she pulled her hand away.
“Let’s hear,” she told him, thankful for the brief rest, allowing her to recover herself. It was indeed in tune. “O fie! The treble jars.”

“Spit in the hole, man, and tune again,” Lucentio told him, fear and frustration staining his words with anger, and with a scowl, Hortensio left them once more.

The false Cambio reached out to touch her face and Bianca pulled away, taking a deep breath. She had read too much on love, to fall so lightly. She needed better assurances.

“Now let me see if I can construe it - ‘Hic ibat Simois,’ - I know you not – ‘hic est Sigeia tellus,’ - I trust you not,” she told him and though his face fell, she ploughed onwards. “‘Hic steterat Priami,’ - take heed he hear us not – ‘regia,’ - presume not – ‘celsa senis,’ - despair not.”

“Madam, ‘tis now in tune,” Hortensio told her and with a nod, and a deep pang of unexpected pain and loneliness, she rose from the couch.

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“Lucentio, you shall supply the bridegroom’s place:
And let Bianca take her sister’s room.”
- William Shakespeare, The Taming of the Shrew, Act 3, Scene 2

They sat, at first, in awkward silence, neither speaking and Tranio wondered again at the words Lucentio had told him in desperate tones - ‘I know you not, I trust you not, despair not’. Around them the party grew in intensity, noise and revelry uniting, until all individual conversation was lost.

Taking a deep draw of his own wine, Tranio leant closer to Bianca, his tone hushed. “Like you not my master, lady?”

She smiled at him and paused for a second, fingers running around the edge of her glass. “I like him well enough... for a tutor.”

“And yet as nothing more?”

“He claims to have studied The Art of Love,” she told him wryly.

“Nay,” he laughed. “He did but lift it once and even then mockery eagerly swept aside his sincere desire to learn. I hope I have not offended, sweet lady.”

“It is a tiresome tome,” she agreed.

“And heavy in its own self regard. What would you have him study instead? Beyond your own perfection.”

“I would have him study his own foolishness in claiming knowledge he does not possess.”

“Not something softer?” It was a deep relief and momentary release, to shirk off his concerns in the light humour of flattery. “Have pity, tell us what to read?”
“Tell him to read the Greeks instead, for poetry is softer in their tongue,” she said with a smile and then bit her lip softly. “And I would have you read me Sappho.”

Tranio hesitated, surprised at the brazenness of the request and then an old forgotten memory of youth came to his mind. Of being still lads, led in the thick grass beneath the swaying of an apple tree, with Lucentio beside him and their hands joined. Not thinking, he reached out and took her own hand, linking them as those fingers in memory had linked and let the recaptured sensation draw the words from him again. An echo of Lucentio’s voice.

“He seems to me equal to the gods that man
whoever he is who opposite you
sits and listens close

to your sweet speaking
and lovely laughing — oh it
puts the heart in my chest on wings

for when I look at you, even a moment, no speaking
is left in me
no: tongue breaks and thin

fire is racing under skin
and in eyes no sight and drumming
fills ears

and cold sweat holds me and shaking
grips me all, greener than grass
I am and dead — or almost

I seem to me.”

There was a long silence as the poem faltered, his memory ending and after a moment Tranio unlaced their fingers, reaching for his wine.

“I had not heard that translation before,” Bianca told him softly, her eyes beautiful in the firelight.

“I am sorry lady,” he apologised. “It is but a poor one.”

She shook her head and he realised there were tears on her eyelashes. “No, most beautiful and with something of the truth.”

“Then look more kindly upon he who translated it,” he told her, directing her gaze across to Lucentio at the edge of the room. “He walks but a step or two behind you, shadowing all your steps.”

And those words and the warmth of the wine and the memory of that summer day still fresh within him, broke him. Deep and painful. And he found he could look at Lucentio no more.

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“When I lament, warn you perhaps that right and wrong
are confused by all? Friendship and loyalty empty words.
Ah me, it’s not safe to praise your love to a friend:
if he believes your praise, he’ll steal her himself.”
- Ovid, Ars Amatoria, LXVIII

Lucentio stood and watched, the party turning around him, as hands pressed together, Tranio and Bianca spoke in earnest, whispered conversation. He felt as if he might shatter. Anger and jealousy mingling with his longing for both.

He had not known that he wanted Bianca. Not felt the seed of regard planted in his breast, nor felt it flourish, grow twisting and strong until it had overwhelmed his heart. As if he were caught in her knotted briars. And inside those woody thorns, Tranio still burning brightly.

For a moment they both turned and looked at him, mocking. Guilt chased, Tranio dropped Bianca’s hand and bent his eyes downwards. Casting him out. The sight threatened to overturn him and Lucentio stumbled free of the party.

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“And though drunkenness is harmful, it’s useful to pretend:
make your sly tongue stammer with lisping sounds,
then, whatever you say or do that seems too forward,
it will be thought excessive wine’s to blame.”
- Ovid, Ars Amatoria, LXV

The pall that Katherina’s dark departure had thrown, had led the guests to a wild abandon and oblivion, but it was easier than it should have been for Bianca to lead Tranio unseen, stumbling, to her room.

They stood for a moment clutching each other and then Tranio kissed her, deep and passionate, and hot with the taste of wine. Bianca did not move, not sure what she should do and then her hands crept upwards to cradle his neck, feeling her breath quickening in her stomach.

Tranio swayed against her lips and then fell backwards onto her bed, laughing, almost pulling her with him. She let him fall, an undignified, crumpled heap and watched for a second, as he stared at her through hooded eyes and a mess of hair. Sinking onto the bed beside him, she stroked it back from his sweaty forehead. Sitting up, he kissed her again. Thin fire ran, shivery, across her skin.

“Shhhh...” she whispered to him, pulling away slightly, though she let his hand tangle in her hair.

``Mmmm...’’ he murmured against her skin.

“Tranio, what does your master want? What are Lucentio’s intentions for me?’’ She kept her voice as soft, even and reassuring as she could, trying to ignore the pounding of her heart.

“Marriage,’’ he told her. “Purest marriage.’’

“And you, friend Tranio, when we be wed - what does your fate promise? I have seen how he
looks at you. How you look at him. Where do I stand in your love?"

Tranio’s fingers fell from her hair and he pulled away, hurt confusion, in his eyes. Bewilderment. He sank backwards into her pillows.

“I do not know,” he told her, voice strained. “If I leave I am paid, free, no longer a servant... if I stay... I do not know. Why would I stay?”

There was a plea in the last question and Bianca took his hand.

“Because you love him, he loves you.”

He shook his head. “To be loved with such unswerving constancy? Such passion and regard? Such care? I know not whether that be gift or curse. He has loved me since I was three years old.”

Bianca thought that she understood then, for just a second, the crippling fear that had struck him. The panic. The fear of failing Lucentio’s expectations. The fear of truly being found wanting by the one who mattered. The fear of losing that love, of not choosing to leave it but losing it still. As if he were caught in a storm, his anchor had snapped. It was the same fear that made her sister lash out, setting defensive walls between herself and the world. Releasing his hands, she shifted closer, wrapping her arms around his chest.

“If I do not marry him... what then?” She asked, as gently as she could.

“Nothing. His father would destroy us.”

“And if I do, will you love me? Will he love me?”

The question sprung from her lips unbidden - a sudden desperate need to know that if she committed to this, she would not be unloved and lonely. Still lonely. Trapped forever. Lonely.

“We would love you.”

“And you would stay?”

“Aye, I would stay. I shouldn’t be telling you this,” he moaned, head sinking upon her breast sleepily. She ran her fingers through his soft, damp hair, letting him drift, feather light, into sleep.

“I have read the Art of Love, tiresome as it is,” she sighed, speaking softly. “I know its ways:-

‘But to get to know your desired-one’s maid
is your first care: she’ll smooth your way.
Corrupt her with promises, and with prayers:
She’ll not give you away, sharing the guilt for the crime,
and you’ll know whatever your lady’s done, and said.’"

The words trailed away and she felt the heavy relief of sleep settle upon her.

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“Mistress Bianca, bless you with such grace
As longeth to a lover's blessed case!
Nay, I have ta'en you napping, gentle love,
Tranio woke and ran a tongue along his dry, parched lips. He could feel the stale film of alcohol coating his mouth, the dull ache in his head, and arms he did not recognise wrapped around him. But all he felt, all he was aware of was that he could breathe. He did not remember the last time he had breathed so freely, as if a heavy weight had been set aside.

The sun warmed his skin and the smell of the room stirred gently around him, it smelled of Bianca and then he remembered. Remembered the night before. Remembered quoting her poetry and drinking and a kiss or two and then all the things he’d told her in this room. Her room. All the things he shouldn’t have told her and all the things he didn’t regret, couldn’t regret, telling her.

“Mmmm...” he murmured, rolling over and pressing his face into her neck, kissing her shoulder blade. She laughed softly and he felt her lips, soft against his forehead and then he felt her stiffen.

“Tranio,” she whispered.

He opened his eyes, the light blinding him for a second, but as the brightness cleared he found Lucentio. Sat on the chair facing them, his expression cold and bleak.

“Have you barred all doors and left me hearth less, Tranio?” He asked, bitterness tingeing his words for the first time he could remember.

Tranio could not speak, could not answer his master, his tongue unbiddable and his mind stalled. He could see Lucentio’s hands clenching around the seat of the chair, knuckles white, and he could do nothing.

Beside him Bianca breathed out slowly and then climbed over him, out of the bed. She was still in the dress she had worn the night before, her hair disheveled and glitter shining on her skin as she moved towards Lucentio. Beautiful, nymph like, entrancing.

She took Lucentio’s hands and pulled him from his chair, standing for a moment, silent. Lucentio more emotionless than Tranio had ever seen him, older and broken.

“Come to bed, husband,” she told him softly and Tranio saw something like hope catch spark in Lucentio’s eyes. “Come to bed. We have been waiting.”

He let her lead him to the bed, not like a lamb to the slaughter, but like a king to his throne. Still terrified and uncertain, Tranio reached out a hand to him and as Lucentio took it. Tranio pressed a kiss to his palm and Lucentio sank onto the bed beside him, cradling his cheek still in his hand and leaning forward, kissed him. It felt oddly like a new, impossible thing.

“Is this not impossible?” Lucentio asked and Tranio could but nod.

Behind them Bianca sat and resting her cheek on Lucentio’s back suddenly laughed, joyfully and both turned to look at her. She smiled at them, without art, directing their gaze to her looking glass. All three reflected in its depth, a tangled mass of love and limbs.

“Lucentio shall play the poet and I the shrew,” she told them, her words torn between joy and wonder. “And thee, Tranio, thee shall be the master of all. And our love will be unknowable, unspeakable but ours and ours alone.”
“Let all be betrayed: I've unbarred the gates to the enemy:
and let my loyalty be to treacherous betrayal.”
- Ovid, Ars Amatoria, II.XIV

End Notes

I probably should apologise to Ovid, who has written some wonderful things, even if I'm not entirely sure Ars Amatoria is one of them. I have spared you from the best of his beauty advice ("no rankness of the wild goat under your armpits, no legs bristling with harsh hair"), or his lengthy tip to rape a girl because she'll most possibly want it anyway or the bit where he tells men to drop through girls' ceilings head first. The translation used here is by A.S. Kline and has provided me endless entertainment in the last few weeks.

The first of Sappho's poems is translated by Willis Barnstone and the second (which I have ruthlessly stolen for Lucentio) was translated by Anne Carson.

The rest of the good words, of course, belong to William Shakespeare.

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