Scene Thirteen

(At a tavern on the post road at St. Jean-de-Luz. Lafayette by himself at table stage right. Door downstage right. Three men at table upstage facing the audience, each with pile of coins in front of his own chess board. Three simultaneous games in progress. Downstage left a table with two men and two women in front of whom are food and drink at various stages of consumption; they are animated, full of chatter about the King, Queen, and Lafayette.)

***Lafayette:*** (Raises an empty glass of madeira to the tavern girl playing chess with the three men, calling for refill; she signals that she will be right on. She stands and plays each man successively, moving from one to the other. She makes her moves quickly, they ponder.)

***Catherine:*** (Successively, to chess challengers #1, #2, #3.) My bishop takes your knight. (She drops a coin onto the pile.) You’ve got to move before I can; those are the rules. (To chess challenger #2, who nervously moves a pawn one space, drops a coin onto the pile in front of his board; Catherine surveys and moves her knight.) Check. You’re done in three. (Drops her coin into the respective pile.)

***Challenger #2:*** Catherine, how do you know?

***Catherine:*** I cheat. (Moves on to chess challenger #3. Surveys the board. Looks at him intently.) Since my last move, you’ve moved twice, rook here, pawn there.

***Challenger #3:*** I did not! (Stands, indignantly.) Ask them. (Points to challengers #1 and #2.)

***Challengers #1/#2:*** (They look at him. Then at Catherine. Silence.)

***Challenger #3:*** I’m done. I’ll take what’s mine. (Reaches for coins in front of his board.)

***Catherine:*** (Calmly pulls a knife from her skirt pocket and waves it in front of him.) I defend what’s mine. Go right ahead. Take just one coin.

***Lafayette:*** (Sees what’s happening. Stands.) Sister! Does the gentleman need escort out?

***Challenger #3:*** (Looks at Lafayette. Then Catherine. Exits in a huff as Catherine pockets her knife and collects her winnings. Rowdy table goes back to rowdiness, having quieted during the ruckus at the chess table. Catherine resolutely turns to Lafayette.) I can handle myself. I don’t need help. (Turns to walk away; Lafayette grabs her arm, quickly releases it when she stares down at his grip.)

***Lafayette:*** I’m sorry. My name is…

***Catherine:*** I know who you are. I read. I don’t just look at the pictures.

***Challenger #1:*** Catherine!

***Catherine:*** (Leaves Lafayette standing, curtly goes to Challenger #1 who earlier dropped his coin in the pile as did challenger #2. Makes her move, drops her coin, moves to challenger #2, moves, drops her coin.) Checkmate in two. (Curtly back to Lafayette.) You humiliated me! What gives you…

***Lafayette:*** Wait, wait, wait…

***Catherine:*** I don’t need anybody to fight my fights! I have a reputation.

***Lafayette:*** I just thought…

***Catherine:*** No. You didn’t think. You assumed. Women are stupid and helpless.

***Lafayette:*** I’m sorry. (Pause.) You’re not stupid and you’re obviously not helpless.

***Catherine:*** Well. Don’t do it again. (Calming.) What else do you want?

***Lafayette:*** (Taps his glass, indicating need for refill. She scurries offstage left. Lafayette walks to Challenger #2, who looks up.) What’s this?

***Challenger #2:*** Chess.

***Lafayette:*** Three against one?

***Challenger #2:*** Us against Catherine. It’s unfair to us. She doesn’t lose.

***Lafayette:*** Wagers? (Points to coins.)

***Challenger #2:*** Each move, one livre. Checkmate wins the pot.

***Lafayette:*** Stalemate?

***Challenger #2:*** Pot stays. Checkmate is the only way to win it.

***Lafayette:*** Why chess?

***Challenger #2:*** Why not? Ask Catherine. Get her started. Just say, “Achilles.”

***Lafayette:*** Achilles? (Looks at chessboard.) Move your bishop there.

***Challenger #2:*** Why? She’ll checkmate with one move.

***Lafayette:*** You’re right. But you’ll be one livre richer. (Walks back to his table.)

***Catherine:*** (Brings madeira. Her sister waits on the rowdies. She sets the glass down. Hesitates. Turns to leave.)

***Lafayette:*** Please. Sit.

***Catherine:*** I really…

***Lafayette:*** For a moment. (Both sit.) Why chess?

***Catherine:*** Men can’t stand to lose to a woman. They’ll pay for the privilege. I make more money off my wits.

***Lafayette:*** Chess in a tavern. It takes imagination…

***Catherine:*** It’s a noble game. It has consequences. People said it would never work. But I knew better. I had to get over them telling me what I could and couldn’t do.

***Lafayette:*** What does “Achilles” have to do with it?

***Catherine:*** Who’ve you been talking to?

***Lafayette:*** Doesn’t matter…who taught you to play?

***Catherine:*** My father. Taught me to read, too. I don’t have any brothers.

***Lafayette:*** Does your father own the tavern?

***Catherine:*** He’s dead. I own it.

***Lafayette:*** I don’t see how you keep it up.

***Catherine:*** I have arrangements…anyway, my father was a smart man. Read all the time. Homer. Plutarch. He had his opinions. Made up his own mind. He expressed his opinion once too often.

***Lafayette:*** Achilles? They (waving toward the challengers.) said to get you started. What’s the story?

***Catherine:*** (Thinks twice as to whether she wants to explain, then launches.) What’s your code?

***Lafayette:*** Code?

***Catherine:*** Look at them. Eat. Drink. It’s a ritual. No fire or spirit, not really. Just killing time. It’s a culture of diversion. Everybody has to decide how to make life worth living.

***Lafayette:*** Yours is Homer. The Iliad. Achilles and a code of honor. Be the best at everything. It’s not platitude to you. (Pause.) Don’t you want more than this? (Indicates the tavern.)

***Catherine:*** I’ve staked out my place…chess is part of it. I’m reconciled. But on my terms. I know my station. Socrates thought the good life was about justice. For me, it’s about honor.

***Lafayette:*** “Cur non!” That’s my code.

***Catherine:*** “Why not?” Adventurous. What’s a Marquis doing in St. Jean-de-Luz. You’re table talk here all the time. Word has it you’re in America. Obviously, you’re lost.

***Lafayette:*** What do they say?

***Catherine:*** They cheer you, mostly. A few say you’re crazy. Why are you here?

***Lafayette:*** My father-in-law in Paris…(Hesitates.) I have to talk with my father-in-law.

***Catherine:*** The Duc d’Ayen. The mighty Duc d’Ayen. He objects.

***Lafayette:*** How do you know?

***Catherine***: I read. I play chess. I figure things out.

***Lafayette:*** I want to explain to him why I’m doing what I’m doing.

***Catherine:*** You’re pathetic.

***Lafayette:*** Pathetic!?

***Catherine:*** Yes. Pathetic. Anything you want you can have. What you’re waiting for is somebody to tell you it’s all right. But not just anybody.

***Lafayette:*** No. No, no. You don’t understand.

***Catherine:*** Don’t I? (Gets up. Goes to chess challenger #1 and moves.) Check-mate. (Moves to chess challenger #2 and surveys the board.) Sure that’s the move you want? (Nods affirmatively. She moves.) Checkmate.

***Chess challenger #2:*** (Motions to chess challenger #1.) Let’s go. (To Catherine, who is collecting her winnings.) Till next time. (As he walks past Lafayette.) Thanks. Good advice. (Exits.)

***Catherine:*** What was that about?

***Lafayette:*** He made a choice…I need to go. It’s time…

***Catherine:*** I know you.

***Lafayette:*** But we’ve never met.

***Catherine:*** You’re all the same. You have privilege. You have choice. You know what you want to do but you need endorsement to do it.

***Lafayette:*** It’s not that simple.

***Catherine:*** Things are only complicated when you can’t decide what’s important and what’s not. (He gives her a look that lasts longer than perhaps it should, turns, exits. She returns to rowdies to help her sister clean up.)

(Lights dim.)