

1 BLACK SCREEN 1

TITLES BEGIN over the SOUNDS of city traffic.

FADE UP:

2 EXT. THEATER DISTRICT OF BROADWAY - DUSK 2

The sidewalks are filled with theater-goers heading for their shows. Cabs line the streets.

SIDE ALLEY

A cab quickly turns into the alley, coming to a screeching halt. A Man in a Grey Suit jumps out and rushes to the side entrance of a theater.

In the background we see that the title of the play, "Anonymous", is written on the theatre's marquee...

3 INT. BROADWAY THEATER - BACKSTAGE - DUSK 3

We follow the Man in the Grey Suit as he rushes through narrow backstage hallways, passing several ACTORS dressing in Elizabethan costumes, applying their make-up, etc...

TITLES CONTINUE.

4 INT. BROADWAY THEATER - BACKSTAGE/EMPTY STAGE - DUSK 4

The curtains are still closed, and the sound of the audience excitedly MURMURING behind them is heard. .

Stagehands are moving stage lights as--

A STAGE MANAGER

takes a nervous peek through the curtains to check the audience-- it's a full house. He holds a prop umbrella in one hand, anxiously checks his watch in the other.

He looks on both wings of the stage-- and then relief floods his face as he sees The Man in the Grey Suit hurrying over to him. The Stage Manager wordlessly hands him the umbrella and signals to a stagehand in the background.

The curtains start to OPEN and the MURMUR of the audience dies down.

1

5

INT. BROADWAY THEATER - THE STAGE - CONTINUOUS

5

The man with the umbrella stands on the empty stage, a single light on him. He is "PROLOGUE". (We will see the same actor later as the "Prologue" of Henry V).

"Prologue" regards his audience for a beat before:

## PROLOGUE

Soul of the Age!  
 The applause, delight, the wonder of  
 our stage!  
 Our Shakespeare, rise...  
 (beat, repeating)  
 Our Shakespeare... For he is all of  
 ours, is he not? The most performed  
 playwright of all time! The author of  
 37 plays, 154 sonnets, and several  
 epic poems that are collectively known  
 as the ultimate expressions of  
 humanity in the English language. And  
 yet... And yet...  
 (beat)  
 Not a single manuscript of any kind  
 has ever been found written in  
 Shakespeare's own hand. In four  
 hundred years, not one document-- be  
 it poem, play, diary or even a simple  
 letter.  
 (beat)  
 He was born the son of a glove-maker,  
 and at some unknown time, armed with  
 but an elementary school education, he  
 went to London where, the story goes,  
 he became an actor and eventually a  
 playwright.

## OFF STAGE

A stagehand takes a wooden hammer and beats against a flat metal pate, creating the SOUNDS of THUNDER.

Another stagehand starts to lift shutters in front of a stage light back and forth to create LIGHTNING STRIKES.

## ON STAGE

"Prologue" opens his umbrella.

## PROLOGUE (CONT'D)

He died at the age of 56, and was  
 survived by his wife and two daughters  
 who were, like Shakespeare's own  
 father, irrefutably illiterate.

2

OFF STAGE

In the rafters a stagehand opens valves. It starts to RAIN.

PROLOGUE (O.C.) (CONT'D)

His will famously left his second best bed to his widow. But it made no mention of a single book or manuscript.

The actor who will play "Ben JONSON" (mid 30's) appears in the wings, bearded, ready to go on stage, holding a prop leather manuscript. Behind him a group of Elizabethan "soldiers" strap on their swords.

ON STAGE

"Prologue" continues, as do TITLES.

PROLOGUE (CONT'D)

Is it possible Shakespeare owned no books at his death because... he could not read? That he wrote no letters because he, like his father before him and his children after him, could not write?

(lets that sink in, then)

Our Shakespeare is a cypher, a ghost; his biography made not by history... but by conjecture. His story not written with facts, but with... imagination.

The rain has intensified. "Prologue" turns and the camera starts to leave him and the TITLES END....

PROLOGUE (CONT'D)

(more energetic)

So! Let me offer you a different story. A darker story... Of quills and swords. Of power and betrayal. Of a stage conquered, and a throne lost!

A FLASH OF LIGHTNING, and for a moment only sheets of RAIN are visible. No stage, no "Prologue". Then, through the rain, we see a form of a man... Ben Jonson... running. Then we make out the shapes of houses... a street. We're not on a stage anymore. We are:

6 EXT. BANKSIDE LONDON - 1604 NIGHT 6

Jonson-- carrying the manuscript-- runs up the street toward a large circular theater.

He frantically opens the wooden door to the theater--

7 INT. THE ROSE THEATER - NIGHT 7

--and he quickly bolts it behind him, turns, and desperately looks for a place to hide. He runs towards the stage as--

8 EXT. THE ROSE THEATER - CONTINUOUS 8

About a dozen uniformed guards reach the door. They are led by Sir Richard POLE (40), Captain of the Guard.

POLE  
Break it down!

And several of the guards charge the door with their pikes, HITTING it hard.

POLE (CONT'D)  
Again!

9 INT. THE ROSE THEATER - CONTINUOUS 9

Jonson hurries backstage, and disappears from our view just as--

10 EXT/INT. THE ROSE THEATER - CONTINUOUS 10

--the guards SMASH the door open. Pole is the first in.

POLE  
Jonson! Jonson!! Show yourself!

The soldiers immediately spread out into different parts of the theater. Jonson's gone. Because--

JONSON

has moved *under* the stage silently scurrying like a rat trying to find a place to hide among the stacks of props and costumes (swords, masks, flags and banners, shields, barrels, canons, etc.) But Jonson freezes when he sees--

THROUGH THE CRACKS OF THE STAGE'S FLOORBOARDS

--the soldiers jump onto the stage and spread out, Pole amongst them.

POLE (CONT'D)  
Out with you! Jonson! We'll smoke  
you out like a rat if we have to!  
(beat)  
Jonson?! Jonson!!

Nothing. A beat, then--

POLE (CONT'D)  
(to a soldier)  
Torch it.

The soldier hesitates.

POLE (CONT'D)  
Torch it! All of you!

The soldiers obey, lighting fire to the walls, the galleries, the columns as--

JONSON

GASPS in horror. Desperate-- he spies an open metal box nearby filled with un-used fireworks.

He tosses the fireworks out of the box-- and then places the bound manuscripts in their place, then closes the box. Then-- he grabs a nearby rapier as--

FLAMES

--begin to take hold everywhere: the columns at the front of the stage... the trompe-l'oeil walls... the seating galleries... the columns...

A TRAP DOOR

opens center-stage, and Jonson JUMPS out, the rapier in his right hand, ready for a fight. But-- three soldiers jump onto the stage, pikes ready.

Jonson-- no fool-- turns and runs for the other end of the stage-- but then runs smack into four other soldiers!

*Ballocks!*

Jonson turns this way and that-- nowhere to run-- grins wryly, drops his sword. Raises his hands in surrender.

11 EXT. THE ROSE THEATER - NIGHT 11

Jonson, his hands tied behind him, is pushed through the door, Pole following.

A small crowd of actors, whores, etc., watch the theater burn. The guards have to push their way through them.

INSERT

The fire reaches the fireworks below the theater's stage, and--

BACK TO SCENE

-- the SOUND of fireworks EXPLODING makes Jonson turn and see:

THE THEATER

Timbers CRASH and fireworks EXPLODE over the theater.

12 EXT. THE THAMES RIVER - DAWN 12

A longboat carrying Jonson, Pole and the guards makes its way towards the Tower Of London.

13 INT. TOWER OF LONDON - AN INTERROGATION ROOM - DAWN 13

Jonson is thrown into a chair, a guard on either side of him. It's dark-- the only light coming from a few torches in the walls, and a large fire pit at the far side of the room.

An INTERROGATOR (30's) faces him. Dressed all in black, he is wispy thin.

INTERROGATOR

You are Benjamin Jonson, playwright?  
Son of William Jonson, glass-blower,  
son of James Jonson brick-layer?

Jonson nods.

INTERROGATOR (CONT'D)

And have you ever been arrested  
before, Mr. Jonson?

JONSON

I'm a writer, aren't I? Of course  
I've bloody well been--

And a guard BACKHANDS Jonson on the face full force-- hard enough to send Jonson and the chair to the ground. His nose starts to bleed.

As the Guards pull him up, the Interrogator looks across the room-- there is someone else there, a FIGURE, watching, but cloaked in the darkness.

Jonson notices the figure as well. We hear a voice from the darkness.

FIGURE

Ask him about the plays.

JONSON

(to the Interrogator)

Plays?

(to the Figure)

Which would you prefer, my lord? A pastoral? An historical? An historical-pastoral, or an hysterical historical pastoral--

And SMACK! He's hit by the guards again. He SPITS out a tooth.

INTERROGATOR

We are not interested in your plays, Jonson. We are interested in the plays given to you by Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford.

Jonson stares at him a beat, and then looks into the darkness.

JONSON

I'm sorry my lord, but I am not sure I know whereof you speak. I have had the honor of meeting his lordship--

And SMACK--

FLASH CUT TO:

FACES

laughing. Not in this room, somewhere else. Somewhere outside. Before we really understand what we are seeing we are:

BACK IN THE CELL

Jonson blinks, trying to stay conscious. His mouth is ripped, bleeding. So is his nose.

The skin has broken on his forehead. The Interrogator leans into the bloody Jonson.

INTERROGATOR  
Where are the plays?

Before Jonson even has a chance to answer-- SMACK!

CUT TO:

MORE FACES

Laughing. We are:

14 INT. THE ROSE THEATER - DAY 14

And it is nine years earlier. The faces come from an audience watching a play. They find the performance hysterical.

15 EXT. ROSE THEATER/BANKSIDE LONDON - CONTINUOUS 15

The Rose towers above the nearby buildings "Bankside" (the part of London that houses the theaters, whorehouses, etc.).

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SOUTHAMPTON (O.S.)  
Well?

TWO MEN

walk towards the theater. Edward de Vere (47), the Earl of OXFORD, an intensely handsome man. His clothes have seen better days.

His companion is Henry Wriothesley, Earl of SOUTHAMPTON (22). Blonde, attractive, a bit of a pretty boy-- and extremely enthusiastic.

SOUTHAMPTON (CONT'D)  
Wonderful, isn't it?

OXFORD  
(frowning slightly)  
Well, it's certainly... big.

SOUTHAMPTON

I promise you, Edward, you've seen  
nothing like it before! Nothing!

OXFORD

Bricklayers and whores watching  
Aristophones? You're quite right,  
Henry, not only have I never witnessed  
it, I'm not sure I care to.

SOUTHAMPTON

(teasing)

You're an elitist, you know that,  
Edward?

Oxford pauses at the entrance.

OXFORD

There won't be puppets, will there?

Southampton grins and gives a few coins to an USHER,  
who escorts the two of them (the retainers stay  
outside) inside.

USHER

My lords...

INT. THE ENTRY OF THE ROSE THEATER - CONTINUOUS

The usher takes them up a flight of stairs. Oxford  
observes everything as they walk.

SOUTHAMPTON

The stage-craft is quite spectacular.  
Far more elaborate than anything I've  
seen at court. I've witnessed be-  
headings that god as my witness look  
as real as at the Tower, cannons fired  
in battle...

They come to the second floor, where a SELLING-MAID has  
a box of food and drink in front of her bosom-- much  
like a match-stick girl.

SELLING-MAID

Ale? Mutton, mi' lord?

Southampton waves her off as they follow the usher up  
another flight of stairs.

SOUTHAMPTON

...and last week, they had some sort of a device to hoist cherubs into the air and fly over the entire audience!

OXFORD

An apò mekhanes theós. Deus ex machina. Machine of the Gods.

And as they ascend up more stairs, Oxford catches glimpses of the stage and performance through the rafters and over the heads of the attending audience.

OXFORD (CONT'D)

Whenever the Greeks wrote their heroes into a situation from which they couldn't write their way out--

Oxford is becoming intrigued by the theater, almost despite himself.

OXFORD (CONT'D)

--Out came the apò mekhanes theós...  
As when Hippolytus is saved by  
Artemis, or Medea flown to Athens...  
Always good for an apò mekhanes theós  
was Euripides

Oxford continues up, two steps behind Southampton.

They come to the third floor and enter the box seating area reserved for nobles, giving Oxford his first real look at the theater itself. Oxford looks around and sees-

FROM OXFORD'S POV

Audience members LAUGHING-- others DRINKING-- maids SELLING food-- the actors ACTING...

*It's alive. Magical.*

BACK TO OXFORD

Oxford takes it all in, almost stunned by it.

ON-STAGE

The actor William SHAKESPEARE (30) plays a commoner. He is handsome, sexy, charismatic; and holds a tankard of ale, and SWIGS from it constantly.

Another actor SPENCER (30) plays "FASTIDIOUS"; a pompous, over-dressed, caricature of a nobleman.

He wears an enormous feather on his hat. Also on stage is an actor called John HEMINGE (late 40's), who plays "Sogliardo"

SHAKESPEARE

And whither were you riding now,  
signior?

"FASTIDIOUS"

Who, I? What a silly jest's that!  
Whither should I ride but to the  
court?

SHAKESPEARE

O, pardon me, sir, twenty places more;  
your hot-house, your pig-house, or  
your whore-house!

The audience ROARS in laughter as Shakespeare looks below at a buxom young lady among the "groundlings". He smiles seductively. She smiles back.

BACKSTAGE

Jonson (now 25 and clean-shaven) is watching the performance from behind a curtain, silently speaking the lines *with* the actors.

IN THE RAISED SEATING

A group of playwrights and poets watch the play with an air of judgement. They are: Christopher "Kit" MARLOWE (32), young, brilliant, a bit foppish (he likes the boys), Thomas NASHE (late 30's)-- a heavy-set, a hard drinking satirist-- and Thomas DEKKER (29), considered a bit of a hack by his colleagues.

They are called the "Mermaid's Wits" because they frequent a pub named The Mermaid's Tavern.

NASHE

(takes a swig of ale)  
His second play, and almost a full  
house.

(burps)  
He's got a wit, does Jonson.

MARLOWE

That might be so, but like a grain of  
wheat hid in a bushel of chaff: you  
shall seek all day ere you find it,  
and when you have it, it's not worth  
the search!

The others smile as a WOMAN passes.

WOMAN

Ale! Ale!!

DEKKER

Marlowe-- spot me a few pence, will you? Henslowe still owes me for "Shoemaker's Holiday".

MARLOWE

(retrieving coins)

That would be because no one saw "Shoemaker's Holiday".

DEKKER

Ale here!

Marlowe gives the woman a few pennies as--

NASHE

Kit... Isn't that one of your unrequited loves in the box over there?

Marlowe glances across the theater and spots Southampton sitting next to Oxford.

MARLOWE

(frowns)

But with whom? Tell me not he prefers the company of such old grey men as that!

Nashe squints.

NASHE

I think-- yes, by the beard, that's the Earl of Oxford. Old Tom Hooker used to play for him. Had his own acting troupe for private Court performances and the like.

DEKKER

I wonder if he needs any material?

MARLOWE

Certainly not any of yours.

NASHE

No, no-- that was years ago. Had a falling out with the Queen, I heard. He's more of a recluse than a patron these days.

ON STAGE

Shakespeare points to "Fastidious".

SHAKESPEARE

Who, he, the noble there? Why, he's a  
gull, a fool, no salt in him i' the  
earth; man, he looks like a fresh  
salmon kept in a tub!

Shakespeare struts around as though he owned the place.  
The more he talks, the more the audience ROARS in  
laughter.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

He sleeps with a musk-cat every night,  
and walks all day hang'd in perfumed  
chains for penance.

A GROUNDLING

Oi! So that's what I been smelling!

More groundlings laugh. Interestingly--

NOBLEMEN

in the box seats do not.

ON STAGE

Shakespeare continues his rant, speaking directly to  
the groundlings.

SHAKESPEARE

He has his skin tann'd in civet, to  
make his complexion strong, and the  
sweetness of his youth lasting in the  
sense of his sweet lady. And, sadly,  
the poor man's brain is lighter than  
his feather...

As the audience HOWLS in laughter, we see:

A NOBLEMAN

with a feathered hat gets up in fury, and exits the  
theater, his lady with him. The Audience LAUGHS at him  
as he goes.

ON STAGE

Shakespeare smiles triumphantly.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

He is a good and empty puff, but he loves you well, signior. I wish you well with him.

OXFORD

Watches the nobleman with the big feathered hat pass by.

BACKSTAGE

Later in the play...

Shakespeare returns backstage and takes a deep swig from his tankard. He's actually drunk, though his performance didn't show it at all. He spots Jonson, and grabs him.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

Jonson! Wonderful dialogue! Wonderful. I hope your next--

HENSLOWE (O.C.)

Will! Will Shakespeare!

Shakespeare turns to see a furious Philip HENSLOWE (50'S) heading his way.

HENSLOWE (CONT'D)

That's not ale in that goblet is it?

Shakespeare hides the goblet behind his back.

SHAKESPEARE

Ale? Me? Drink during a performance?  
I am a professional sir!  
(burps)  
A complete and--

He is interrupted by SCREAMS. Not from actors on stage, but by the audience.

IN THE THEATER

Complete panic erupts as dozens of The Queen's Guard STORM into the theater. Everyone tries to get out as quickly as possible, including the other actors, Henry CONDELL (20's), Thomas POPE (30's), William SLY (13).

SIR RICHARD POLE, THE CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD

--jumps on stage.

POLE

This play has been declared seditious  
and illegal by Lord William Cecil!

The audience begins to BOO at the mention of Cecil.

POLE (CONT'D)

All are herewith ordered to disperse  
immediately!

A GROUNDLING

Why don't you disperse William Cecil's  
arse!

POLE

Arrest that man!

IN OXFORD'S BOX

SOUTHAMPTON

Damn it all. Well! Off to Essex's  
then?

He gets up. Oxford does not, seemingly interested in  
the real drama below as everyone hurries from the  
theater.

SOUTHAMPTON (CONT'D)

Edward?

Oxford turns to him, distracted, and nods.

ON STAGE

Jonson pushes his way on stage.

JONSON

(to Pole)

Seditious? Seditious?! It's a comedy  
for god's sake! There's nothing  
seditious about--

POLE

Oi, is that right, is it? And you  
know this because?

JONSON

Because I wrote the bloody thing! And--  
-

POLE

Arrest him as well!

Jonson is grabbed by guards.

17 INT. A JAIL CELL - DAY

17

Jonson is THROWN into the cell, the door SLAMMED behind him.

JONSON  
 (to the door)  
 A pox on you!  
 (beat)  
 And your carbuncled father!

Jonson looks around-- the cell is filled with a dozen or so other prisoners.

ESSEX (O.S.)  
 People taxed to the point of  
 starvation, Spain running the New  
 World, open revolt in Ireland,  
 Catholic plots everywhere you turn...

CUT TO:

18 INT. TENNIS COURT AT ESSEX HOUSE - DAY

18

Robert, Earl of ESSEX (28), is playing tennis against Southampton. He's handsome, red-headed, and, we will learn, very ambitious.

ESSEX  
 ...and how do the Cecils spend their  
 time and energy? Shutting a theater!  
 A *theater*, for god's sake? It's  
 madness! No wonder the mob hates them  
 so!

The court is inside, and slightly different from today's game: the back walls are playable, somewhat like racquet-ball.

Oxford sits on a bench, watching. Essex SLAMS a shot, but it goes--

OXFORD  
 Out!

Essex looks furious, but holds his tongue. Southampton prepares to serve.

OXFORD (CONT'D)  
 (to Southampton)  
 Henry, how many people were at that  
 play?

16

Southampton pauses before serving.

SOUTHAMPTON

Hmm? I'm not sure, two thousand,  
maybe more.

Southampton SERVES. Essex returns, and another heated rally begins.

OXFORD

And how many performances are there of  
a play like that?

SOUTHAMPTON

Five or six I suppose.

He HITS the ball again, and this time Essex misses it.

ESSEX

By the--!

OXFORD

(to Essex)

So! Ten thousand souls. All  
listening to the writings of one man--  
the *ideas* of one man. That's power,  
Robert. And if there is one thing the  
Cecils understand, it's power.

ESSEX

(snorts)

And when did words ever win a kingdom?  
I think I'll keep my sword, thank you  
very much.

Southampton SERVES as Oxford smiles at Essex's naiveté.

19

INT. CHANGING ROOMS/ESSEX HOUSE - DAY

19

Southampton and Essex are dressing out of their tennis clothes and into their normal clothes, assisted by two valets.

ESSEX

(to the valets)

Leave us.

(they exit)

Henry... Some of my men have...  
intercepted... some of William Cecil's  
recent correspondence with King James  
of Scotland...

17

Southampton pauses in clothing himself. This is serious.

ESSEX (CONT'D)

Cecil's all but promising him the throne...

SOUTHAMPTON

To James? Elizabeth would never agree to-

ESSEX

Elizabeth is old. Ill. Not of her old mind. Sometimes she doesn't even recognize me. And yet, still she refuses to name an heir.

SOUTHAMPTON

But a Scotsman? On the Tudor throne?

ESSEX

You are not in the Privy Council. Elizabeth does everything the Cecils wish of her. Everything!

BEHIND THEM

Oxford enters. They don't notice, though. He instantly realizes he shouldn't say anything. He listens as:

WIDER

ESSEX (CONT'D)

Think, Henry, if James owes Cecil his throne, Cecil will have more influence in the next reign than he does in this one. And after William Cecil, his hunch-backed son will take his place...

(careful)

That is why we must do everything in our power to ensure that the right man succeeds her.

(beat)

A man deserving of the Tudor crown.

Southampton stiffens at that last phrase.

ESSEX (CONT'D)

I ask you for the support of you and your men, Henry.... if it comes to a fight.

Southampton looks at Essex hard.

SOUTHAMPTON  
You know you need not ask. I stand  
with you, as I always have.

Essex smiles at him warmly. They both HEAR something  
shuffle behind them. They turn, and see:

WHERE OXFORD WAS STANDING

Nothing. He is gone.

BACK TO SOUTHAMPTON AND ESSEX

They exchange a slightly worried look.

CUT TO:

20

EXT. ESSEX HOUSE - DAY

20

Moments later, Oxford and Southampton are exiting the  
elaborate building that serves as Essex's London  
residence.

OXFORD  
Essex played rather poorly, didn't he?

Southampton just nods, distracted. Oxford reaches out  
to him, and touches his shoulder.

OXFORD (CONT'D)  
(warning)  
Henry... The Cecils brook no rivals.

Southampton pauses, confused for an instant, then--

SOUTHAMPTON  
(re: his discussion with  
Essex)  
You heard?

Oxford nods.

SOUTHAMPTON (CONT'D)  
Always concerned for me, aren't you  
Edward?

They keep walking towards Southampton's men.

SOUTHAMPTON (CONT'D)  
And what would you have me do?

OXFORD

I would have you deny him.

SOUTHAMPTON

The son of the Queen?

OXFORD

That is rumor only, Henry--

They stop. Southampton makes sure that his men are out of earshot.

SOUTHAMPTON

Rumor? My god, all you have to do is look at Essex to see the Queen's reflection. Everyone thinks he's her son, everyone! And I for one would rather bow to a Tudor, bastard though he may be, than a Scotsman!

OXFORD

I desire nothing more than to see the next king be the rightful king. But what Essex contemplates will surely lead to Civil War.

(beat)

No. If this is to be done, it must be done carefully, skillfully.

SOUTHAMPTON

As I heard it, Elizabeth exiled you from her presence for the last twenty years because of your "skill" at Court politics.

And then he feels instantly ashamed of having said that.

OXFORD

I only have your interests in mind, Henry. For as you so rightly point out, my interests are already lost.

SOUTHAMPTON

I know. Forgive me. You know how I feel about you. You have been a great friend to me ever since my father died. I promise you that I will do nothing rash without consulting you first.

Oxford nods, still worried, and Southampton heads for his horse.

OXFORD

Henry! Will you do me one thing more?  
Deliver a gift for me? A rather...  
elaborate gift?

21 EXT. CECIL HOUSE - SUNSET 21

The stone house is nothing like a stereotypical Tudor house; it's enormous, and very ornate and intricate in design.

It faces the river, and has an elaborate docking area which is now filled with all sorts of longboats letting the noblemen off for a week-end get away.

22 INT. CECIL HOUSE - GREAT HALL - DUSK 22

Most of England's nobility is assembled in small groups, talking. It's a dour, quiet affair. Some music, no life. Quite Puritan.

Southampton is there, but Essex and Oxford are nowhere to be seen.

A HUNCH-BACKED MAN

--makes his way through the room, causing conversations to cease as he walks by. Even the most senior of the nobles bow their heads slightly in greeting him. This is Sir ROBERT CECIL (mid 30's).

He pauses near Southampton.

SOUTHAMPTON

Sir Robert.

ROBERT CECIL

My lord of Southampton.

(looking around)

Have you seen Essex?

SOUTHAMPTON

I believe he is still in the viewing chamber with her majesty...

ROBERT CECIL

(sharp, annoyed)

Alone?

SOUTHAMPTON

(smiles)

With your father in London dealing  
with all the troubles in Ireland, who  
else should the Queen turn to but  
Essex?

Robert Cecil looks annoyed, but holds his tongue as the  
SOUND of pikes HITTING the floor silences the hall.

A FOOTMAN clears his throat and--

FOOTMAN

By the grace of god, her majesty,  
Elizabeth, Queen of England, Wales and  
Ireland!

DOUBLE DOORS

open, and Elizabeth (in her 60's) enters. She is  
wearing a large sparkling pearl-encrusted dress with a  
wide collar.

She walks slowly and carefully, and has a slight tremor  
in her head and hands. She seems un-certain; like  
she's not sure she recognizes all the faces around her  
(Alzheimer's?). And she compensates for it by being  
all the more regal, all the more un-human.

Essex is on her arm, dressed in a splendid jewel-  
encrusted doublet.

Robert Cecil FROWNS at the sight of Essex on her arm.

Essex ignores Cecil's glare, notices Southampton--

ESSEX

(to Elizabeth)

Ah-- Majesty, I've been told my lord  
of Southampton has a gift for you.

ELIZABETH

(eyes sparkle)

A gift?

SOUTHAMPTON

Yes, your grace, though not from me.

Southampton CLAPS his hands and a door across the room  
OPENS.

A DWARF enters, followed by dancing faires, actors  
swirling sparklers, and musicians playing music.

Elizabeth's rheumy eyes widen in complete delight, a smile of total jubilation crosses her face.

Robert Cecil, on the other hand, looks horrified.

ELIZABETH

Are you this gift, my precious little man?

DWARF

No, no, my most majestic majesty. I am a free man. My gift is a play, majesty.

ELIZABETH

A play?

The dwarf bows his assent.

ROBERT CECIL

(to the Dwarf)

Plays are the work of the devil, born from a cesspool of plague, whoredom, thievery, fornication, and heresy. You may tell your master that her majesty--

ESSEX

(interrupting)

--Will gladly accept your gift.

Robert Cecil turns to Essex, shocked.

ESSEX (CONT'D)

(to Elizabeth)

Of course that is if you so desire, majesty.

(to Robert Cecil)

The choice is her majesty's to make, not yours. Is that not so Sir Robert?

Robert frowns as Elizabeth looks around, unsure of the political tides around her. Then--

ELIZABETH

(to the dwarf)

Comedy? Or tragedy?

DWARF

Comedy, majesty.

ELIZABETH

(delighted)

A comedy!

(MORE)

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

(beat)

By whom?

DWARF

By... Anonymous, your majesty...

ELIZABETH

Anonymous...?

(then)

Oh, but I do so admire his verse...

Elizabeth lets go of Essex, and offers her hand to the Dwarf, who smiles brightly.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

Lead us to this gift.

And the Dwarf leads Elizabeth towards the door. Essex follows, and Southampton locks into step next to him. They exchange a knowing look as--

Robert Cecil steps in line far after the Queen, not happy with this turn of events as we hear--

"QUINCE" (O.S.)

Bless thee, Bottom! Bless thee! Thou art translated!

CUT TO:

23

EXT. THE GROUNDS AT CECIL HOUSE - NIGHT

23

Sheer magic. Candles everywhere: in stakes, in the ground, in the trees. They light a make-shift "stage" surrounded by huge oak trees on three sides.

"BOTTOM"

I see their knavery: this is to make an ass of me; to fright me, if they could. But I will not stir from this place, do what they can.

Chairs have been brought out and put in rows in the grass. Elizabeth is watching center front row (of course). She loves it, SQUEALING in delight like a young woman. Essex is next to her.

ON STAGE

Several actors are mid-scene in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" (Act 3, Scene 1), their make-up quite elaborate and fantastical: "Bottom", who is costumed as a man-- except that he has a DONKEY'S HEAD, "Quince", a commoner, "Puck", played by the dwarf who is now dressed like a cupid, and "Titania", Queen of the fairies, who is presently asleep in a bed of fur. Puck hides behind a tree watching.

"BOTTOM" (CONT'D)

I will walk up and down here, and I  
will sing, that they shall hear I am  
not afraid.

BACKSTAGE

Oxford watches from behind a curtain, carefully observing the Queen's reaction. Somehow we feel that seeing her again after so many years stirs up some deep emotion in him.

ON STAGE

"BOTTOM" (CONT'D)

(sings)

The ouzel cock so black of hue,  
With orange-tawny bill,  
The throstle with his note so true,  
The wren with little quill--

Titania awakens in her nest-like bed of fur.

"TITANIA"

What angel wakes me from my flow'ry  
bed?

ELIZABETH

strongly reacts to Titania awakening. It stirs some memory in her. A pleasant memory.

OXFORD

watches, delighted by her reaction.

FROM HIS POV

We see Elizabeth watching. But it is an Elizabeth only 26 years old (referred to as YOUNG ELIZABETH in this script). We HEAR the sound of other dialogue, but from the same play. We are:

24

INT. HEDINGHAM CASTLE - GREAT HALL - NIGHT

24

Thirty-eight years earlier. And YOUNG ELIZABETH watches an earlier, slightly less sophisticated staging of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" (the costumes and sets are a bit more thrown together).

All the actors are children from 7-12 years old or so.

FROM BACKSTAGE

A boy watches in the exact same position as we just saw Oxford. This is BOY OXFORD-- now only 10 years old. But he is made up and wears a winged costume for the character of "Puck".

"OBERON" (O.S.)  
...and the owner of it blest ever  
shall in safety rest. Trip away; make  
no stay;  
meet me all by break of day.

And the characters of "Oberon" and "Titania" exit. Boy Oxford hurries--

ON STAGE

"PUCK"  
If we shadows have offended, think but  
this, and all is mended, that you have  
but slumber'd here while these visions  
did appear...

Next to Young Elizabeth, JOHN DE VERE, Oxford's father, also watches, his face beaming with pride.

"PUCK" (CONT'D)  
...And this weak and idle theme, No  
more yielding but a dream, gentles, do  
not reprehend; if you pardon, we will  
mend.

A STERN LOOKING MAN

is watching a few seats away from Young Elizabeth. He is WILLIAM CECIL (40's, Robert's father). He is a Puritan, dressed all in black (with a white lace collar), and has a long beard. He is frowning, loathing the play.

26

ON STAGE

"PUCK" (CONT'D)

So, good night unto you all. Give me  
your hands, if we be friends, and  
Robin shall restore amends.

The play now over, Young Elizabeth applauds with  
delight, as do the small group of courtiers all around  
her.

YOUNG ELIZABETH

Lovely. Lovely!

CUT TO:

25

INT. HEDINGHAM CASTLE - KITCHEN - LATER

25

A make-shift "back-stage" where all the young "actors"  
are removing their costumes and make-up, including Boy  
Oxford, who sits in front of a make-shift, leaning  
mirror.

Much excited talking and commotion, until Boy Oxford  
notices everyone has gone silent. He turns-- his winged  
costume still on-- just as--

YOUNG ELIZABETH (O.S.)

Ah! There he is.

Young Elizabeth and her senior Court, including William  
Cecil and John De Vere, have entered.

Boy Oxford bows deeply.

YOUNG ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

(to Boy Oxford)

Your father tells me you wrote this  
evening's play yourself.

Boy Oxford glances at his father-- *should he answer  
directly?* His father NODS.

BOY OXFORD

I did indeed, your majesty.

YOUNG ELIZABETH

You sport with me.

(smiling)

Compose something.

BOY OXFORD

Now?

27

YOUNG ELIZABETH

Yes. Now.

BOY OXFORD

On what subject, your grace?

She thinks. Then--

YOUNG ELIZABETH

(smiles)

Truth...

BOY OXFORD

(thinks, then--)

For... Truth... is Truth...

Though... never so old...

and time cannot make that false,

which once was true.

She smiles, claps.

YOUNG ELIZABETH

(to John de Vere)

My lord of Oxford. It seems you have added a poet to your family's long line of warriors.

BOY OXFORD

Madam, I am as accomplished with the sword and the musket as I am with verse.

YOUNG ELIZABETH

(amused)

Are you indeed?

BOY OXFORD

(nods seriously)

It is my only desire to one day be your majesty's most trusted servant in matters both of war and state, if you will but have me.

YOUNG ELIZABETH

(charmed)

Why, Lord Cecil, it seems we may very well have found your replacement.

WILLIAM CECIL

We hope not too soon, majesty, we hope not too soon.

YOUNG ELIZABETH  
(teasing)  
And how liked you our young lord's  
play, William?

William Cecil stiffens in discomfort.

YOUNG ELIZABETH (CONT'D)  
(to Boy Oxford,  
conspiratorially)  
Our Lord Cecil is our most religious  
of subjects, and no doubt thinks your  
little masque will deliver your soul  
straight into the arms of Lucifer  
himself. Don't you, William?

The Boy Oxford looks at William Cecil, perplexed by  
such a thing.

WILLIAM CECIL  
That is God's decision, your majesty.  
Not mine.

William Cecil looks directly at John de Vere resulting  
in an uncomfortable silence.

Elizabeth notices.

YOUNG ELIZABETH  
Well, if plays are indeed such a sin,  
I pray I do not find my salvation  
until very late in life.

Boy Oxford smiles. He might very well be in love.

CUT TO:

26

INT. A JAIL CELL - DAY

26

Thirty-eight years later. The door SWEEPS open and a  
snoring, sleeping Jonson is awakened by--

GUARD (O.S.)  
Jonson! Ben Jonson!

The other prisoners make way as the guard approaches  
Jonson. The guard tosses a wax-sealed piece of  
parchment onto Jonson's lap.

GUARD (CONT'D)  
You've been released.

Jonson looks at it, confused.

29

GUARD (CONT'D)  
Got powerful friends, now, don't you?

26A EXT. A BOAT - RIVER THAMES - DAY

26A

Jonson is in a nobleman's longboat (for the first time in his life). Across from him sits FRANCESCO-- Italian, 60's-- wearing a doublet with the Oxford coat of arms on its chest.

The City of London is far in the distance.

Jonson looks around uncomfortably at the luxurious boat for a moment before--

JONSON  
And who are you?

Francesco just stares back.

JONSON (CONT'D)  
And where are we going?

Francesco is silent.

WIDER

The boat approaches a large stone house, Oxford Stone.

CUT TO:

A RED ROSE

as it is cut from its bush by ink-stained hands. We are:

27 EXT. OXFORD STONE - GARDEN - DAY

27

Oxford smells the rose, inhaling its essence. Then he turns and sees Francesco escorting Ben Jonson towards him.

Before they reach him he glances at his wife ANNE De Vere (40's) who sits in the distance knitting with one of their daughter's, BRIDGET (17).

Jonson is quite uncomfortable to be at such a grand place. Jonson CLEARS his throat.

JONSON  
My lord...

OXFORD

The Tudor rose. The most beautiful of flowers, don't you think?

JONSON

It looks to me to have quite a number of thorns, my lord.

OXFORD

So it does. So it does.

JONSON

I am told, my lord, that I owe my freedom to you.

OXFORD

That is true. And it was quite hard to come by. One does not cross my father-in-law lightly.

Jonson doesn't know who he is talking about.

OXFORD (CONT'D)

Lord William Cecil. I have the questionable distinction of being married to his only daughter.

Oxford looks over to his wife who watches them suspiciously. He begins to walk away forcing Jonson and Francesco to follow.

OXFORD (CONT'D)

It did, however, serve as helpful when I wrote to your jailers to release you in my father-in-law's name.

Jonson suddenly looks worried and turns and looks back to Anne.

JONSON

(in a panicked whisper)

My lord-- I'm sorry, does that mean my release is not officially sanctioned?

OXFORD

Don't be an idiot Jonson, of course it wasn't.

(beat)

But you are free, are you not?

They have come to an entrance to a GARDEN MAZE and Anne watches them as they disappear into the maze.

28

EXT. MAZE - DAY

28

Oxford turns to Jonson.

OXFORD

I enjoyed your little comedy last week, Jonson. You have potential, great potential.

JONSON

Thank you, my lord.

OXFORD

But it's politics did seem to have quite an effect on the Tower. My father-in-law's men felt it quite seditious.

JONSON

Politics? My play had nothing to do with politics! It was just a simple comedy--

OXFORD

That showed your betters as fools who go through life barely managing to get food from plate to mouth, were it not for the cleverness of their servants.

(beat)

All art is political, Jonson. Otherwise it would just be decoration. And all artists have something to say, otherwise... they'd make shoes. And you're not a cobbler, are you, Jonson?

As they enter the center of the maze, Oxford turns to his servant.

OXFORD (CONT'D)

(nods)

Francesco.

Francesco steps forward and hands Jonson a leather bound manuscript. Jonson looks at it confused and opens it.

JONSON

A play, my lord?

OXFORD

One you shall stage Bankside.

JONSON

Stage?

32

OXFORD

Under your name.

JONSON

My name, my lord?

OXFORD

I can't very well use my name, can I?  
I'm the seventeenth Earl of Oxford.  
The Lord Great Chamberlain of England,  
Viscount Bolebec, Lord Escales,  
Sandford and Badlesmere, etc, etc.  
No. I have a... reputation to  
protect. In my world, one does not  
write plays, Jonson. People like you  
do.

Jonson tries not to be offended.

JONSON

Yes. My lord. You wrote an entire  
play, my lord. I know how difficult--

OXFORD

Not a play, Jonson, I've written many.  
No doubt, many more than you yourself.  
A good number performed at Court years  
ago, others never seen by a living  
soul.

JONSON

And you want... me to apply my name to  
this play?

OXFORD

No. I mean you to put your name to  
all of them.

JONSON

All of them?

OXFORD

Well don't look like I just gutted  
your pet dog, Jonson. I mean to make  
you the most popular-- and therefore  
the most monetarily successful--  
playwright in all of London.

Jonson pales. This is a disaster for him.

OXFORD (CONT'D)

I wish you god speed and good morrow.

Jonson looks down at the manuscript, reads a few lines.

JONSON

My lord-- I really--

He looks up, but Oxford is gone, having left the maze without so much as a good-bye.

JONSON (CONT'D)

My lord?

But before he can follow, Francesco tosses a leather pouch of coins at his feet.

FRANCESCO

That is for your trouble, Signor Jonson. And your silence. If I hear you break that silence, then... not so good for Signor Jonson.

And Francesco follows after his master as Jonson picks up the pouch, examining its contents.

And then Jonson realizes he doesn't know how to get out of the maze. He chases after them.

JONSON

Hello? My lord?! I--

And he's lost. He looks this way and that, then picks a path (the wrong one).

29

EXT. CECIL HOUSE - DAY

29

Robert Cecil is standing at the opulent river entrance to Cecil House, waiting for an enormous barge docking. William Cecil (now 75) is at the front of the barge, waiting to disembark. He constantly holds an ornately carved white cane.

WILLIAM CECIL

So! I am gone for three days, and you somehow manage to let her spend all of them solely in the company of the Earl of Essex...

Robert Cecil looks at him sharply. How did he know.

WILLIAM CECIL (CONT'D)

Don't think because I was in London, I didn't know exactly what went on here in my absence.

ROBERT CECIL

He is an Earl, father. I cannot deny him--

WILLIAM CECIL

Of course not! You don't deny him anything. You find excuses. She is unwell, she is reading, she is seeing the Ambassador from Russia. For God's sake, use your imagination, Robert. Whatever will you do when I am gone?

(beat)

We will have to deal with Essex soon. His ambitions are becoming a nuisance.

30

INT. CECIL HOUSE - HALLWAY - DAY

30

William Cecil enters an impressive hallway and turns to his son.

WILLIAM CECIL

Now tell me about the play.

Robert Cecil looks surprised for an instant that he knows about that as well.

ROBERT CECIL

It-- it was an anonymous gift. Essex insisted it be performed, just to spite me in front of Court...

WILLIAM CECIL

Of course he did.  
(concerned)  
But what was it about?

ROBERT CECIL

About? Some nonsense about fairies and cherubs.

WILLIAM CECIL

...And dancing asses?

Robert looks surprised at his father who has stopped suddenly.

WILLIAM CECIL (CONT'D)

(realizing, to himself)

Edward...

(to Robert Cecil)

Have you any idea what you have-- No, how could you...

35

And he starts back up the stairs.

ROBERT CECIL  
Father... It was just a play...

WILLIAM CECIL  
And do you know how long it took me to  
banish them from her presence? She  
adores them! Adores them! And Edward  
knows it.

(beat)  
Mark my words, Robert, he has done  
this for a purpose.

ROBERT CECIL  
Purpose? What purpose?

WILLIAM CECIL  
(thinking, to himself)  
What purpose indeed?  
(to Robert)  
But through your carelessness I must  
now deal not only with Essex, but  
Edward as well. For whether in shadow  
or in person, Edward has returned to  
Court!

And with that he slams the door shut.

Robert Cecil walks over to a nearby window. Visibly  
upset he starts to stare out of the window and  
remembers...

CUT TO:

31 OMIT 31

THROUGH A THIRD STORY WINDOW

We see servants carrying big trunks. There are at least  
120 men on horses. They all wear the Oxford's crest.

WILLIAM CECIL (O.S)  
Robert.

32 INT. CECIL HOUSE - HALLWAY - DAY 32

And it is thirty years earlier.

BOY ROBERT CECIL (now 9) is staring out of the window.  
His back must have been deformed either in utero or at  
birth, because even now he is hunchbacked.

WILLIAM CECIL(O.S.)  
(more commanding)  
Robert! Come here.

Finally Boy Robert Cecil turns and sees Young Oxford (now 17) entering the hallway with William Cecil and his wife and daughter, Young ANNE (15). In front of them, lined up, are several men whom we will learn are TUTORS.

Boy Robert Cecil doesn't move.

WILLIAM CECIL (CONT'D)  
(to Young Oxford)  
I am sorry, my lord. But my son Robert prefers the company... of himself...

Boy Robert Cecil watches as his father turns to his mother and sister.

WILLIAM CECIL (CONT'D)  
May I present my wife, Lady Cecil, and my daughter, Anne.

Young Anne curtsies.

YOUNG ANNE  
I am sorry for your loss, my lord. The realm lost a great lord with your father's death. We hope you will be happy in our house--

BOY ROBERT CECIL (O.S.)  
Are you going to live here forever?

Everybody turns and sees the odd hunchback child has finally come over.

YOUNG OXFORD  
(smiles)  
No. Only until I reach my maturity.

BOY ROBERT CECIL  
Why?

WILLIAM CECIL  
Because the Queen has bade it so.  
(to Young Oxford)  
My lord, when we first met, you said you wished to become a great man of State. Both the Queen and I hope to make that so.

(MORE)

WILLIAM CECIL (CONT'D)

To that end, I have the honor of  
introducing you to your tutors.

(indicates one of them)

Seven to eight you shall be tutored in  
French by Mister Crane--

YOUNG OXFORD

Monsieur. Ca me fait plaisir de vous  
connaitre.

Master Crane bows his head.

WILLIAM CECIL

Nine to ten is Greek with Mister  
Simmons.

YOUNG OXFORD

(in Greek)

*Dalon, an d'ego, hoti mathamata ge  
esti ha trafo psychas.*

BOY ROBERT CECIL

Is that Homer?

YOUNG OXFORD

(sharp)

No. Plato.

Boy Robert frowns at the correction.

WILLIAM CECIL

(slight frown, then)

And you know your uncle, Mister  
Golding, who has petitioned me to  
allow you to assist him in his  
translations of ancient Latin texts  
into English.

YOUNG OXFORD

(in Latin)

*Continetne, ut spero, Ovidii  
Metamorphose? Mihi honori erit,  
patrue*

Mister Golding bows his head in appreciation.

WILLIAM CECIL

Then cosmography with Doctor Richards.  
Two to three is geography and history,  
and four to five fencing.

William Cecil seems to have finished.

YOUNG OXFORD  
(to William Cecil)  
And composition? Poetry?

WILLIAM CECIL  
This is a Puritan home, your grace.  
We believe such activities to be the  
worship of false idols, and therefore  
a sin before the eyes of God.

YOUNG OXFORD  
A sin? But surely there must be room  
for beauty and art in life, my lord.

WILLIAM CECIL  
Not in this household.

33

INT. CECIL HOUSE - GREAT HALL - DAY

33

Young Oxford is fencing with a tutor. He's quite good.  
In fact, he's better than the tutor, who is twice his  
age.

Boy Robert Cecil casually watches as he plays chess  
against himself.

Young Oxford, with a fierce, beautifully executed  
attack, disarms his tutor. The tutor's sword FLIES  
into the air, and hits--

THE CHESS BOARD

making the pieces scatter.

WIDER

Boy Robert Cecil looks up, his face furious, to see  
Young Oxford coming over to him.

YOUNG OXFORD  
You were losing anyway.

BOY ROBERT CECIL  
I was also winning.

Young Oxford picks up the sword, throws it to his  
tutor, who catches it.

BOY ROBERT CECIL  
(CONT'D)  
You know I am going to one day succeed  
my father at the Queen's side. Not  
you.

39

Young Oxford motions to go, then picks up the black king, and tosses it to Boy Robert Cecil, who can't catch it because of his deformity. It CLANGS on the floor.

YOUNG OXFORD

Really?

34 INT. CECIL HOUSE - HALLWAY - DAY 34

Moments later, the Young Oxford heads down the hall alone, heading for his rooms, his sword still in his hand.

CUT TO:

POEMS

neatly written on parchment. We are:

35 INT. CECIL HOUSE - YOUNG OXFORD'S ROOM - DAY 35

And a SERVANT is looking at the poems, then quickly stuffing them into a bag.

But then he HEARS footsteps coming. Panicked, he looks for someplace to hide-- a tapestry half covers a door-- he runs to it-- the door is locked!

So he hides behind the tapestry just as the door opens, and Young Oxford enters.

After a few steps, Young Oxford senses something amiss. Looks at his--

WRITING DESK

where the parchments are scattered.

YOUNG OXFORD

goes to his desk, picks up one of the pieces of parchment. It has poetry on it. *His* poetry. He goes through some other pages. And realizes other pages are missing. He becomes infuriated. He sees--

UNDER THE TAPESTRY

Two feet.

WIDER

Young Oxford CHARGES the tapestry, sword in hand. He THRUSTS the sword THROUGH the tapestry.

The man screams in agony as he falls. He doesn't just die, but screams and screams and screams.

Young Oxford steps back-- half in horror... half in triumph. The SOUND of APPLAUSE takes us to:

36

INT. THE ROSE THEATER - BACKSTAGE - DAY

36

Thirty-three years later.

Shakespeare is on stage, taking a bow. The audience is APPLAUDING and SCREAMING their approval of a performance that has just ended. He steps backwards--

BACKSTAGE

--where Jonson stands holding the manuscript Oxford gave him.

SHAKESPEARE

Is it any good?

JONSON

How in blazes should I know?

SHAKESPEARE

You haven't even read it?

And Shakespeare is drawn back--

ON STAGE

--where he bows again, then steps--

BACKSTAGE

--so Jonson can answer him.

JONSON

I read a line or two-- I promised Henslowe I'd finish "Eastward Ho" by Saturday.

SHAKESPEARE

And you say he's a nobleman?

Jonson doesn't answer.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)  
Powerful? Rich??

Jonson still doesn't answer, which is answer enough.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)  
Ohhhh, you have to do it then, don't  
you?

And Shakespeare goes back on stage.

37

EXT. BANKSIDE LONDON - DAY

37

Jonson and Shakespeare are walking along Bankside,  
still mid-conversation. They pass all sorts of vendors  
selling fish, fresh water, food, etc...

JONSON  
I tell you Will-- I came to London to  
become a great poet, to, to, be the  
conscience of our times, the soul of  
our age! To change the world, not to  
become someone else's--

SHAKESPEARE  
(amused)  
Change the world? With rhyme?

JONSON  
Yes, why not? Why can't a man change  
the world with words?

Shakespeare laughs at him.

JONSON (CONT'D)  
(mimicking Oxford)  
"I can make you the most popular and  
the richest playwright in all of  
London."  
(takes a swig)  
Ballocks! I can do that myself, thank  
you very much.

38

INT. THE MERMAID'S TAVERN - NIGHT

38

Shakespeare is perusing the manuscript. Some of the  
actors from the Rose are in the BG.

SHAKESPEARE  
You know, it's actually not half  
bad...

Jonson takes a swig of ale, then--

JONSON

Not half--?! You're an actor, what in God's name do you know about writing?! He's an amateur, Will, a complete and utter amateur. Last week gardening, this week playwrighting, next week hawking.

(takes another swig)

No. I won't do it. It would be an affront against the Muses...

SHAKESPEARE

(smiles)

Well we musn't offend the muses, whatever we do.

(thinks, then)

How much money did you say he gave you?

JONSON

What, you think my name can be bought, if the number's great enough, do you?

Shakespeare smiles enigmatically.

SHAKESPEARE

No, not at all... I think we should keep your good name quite intact, thank you very much.

Jonson frowns, confused as we--

CUT TO:

A RED WIG

as it is placed on the head of Elizabeth. We are:

39 INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - OLD ELIZABETH'S BEDROOM - DAY 39

Elizabeth is behind an elaborately painted screen. Several ladies-in-waiting attend her, helping her get ready for the day. It's an intricate process. Make-up, multiple articles of clothing, jewelry...

WILLIAM CECIL (O.S.)

King Philip of Spain sees the current Catholic revolt in Ireland as a weakness of ours. A weakness to be exploited....

Elizabeth's wig is being glued into place.

ELIZABETH

Ireland?

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE SCREEN (THEN INTERCUT EACH SIDE OF SCREEN AS NEEDED)

William Cecil hasn't realized that his son Robert has sneaked in the room behind him to listen in.

WILLIAM CECIL

There are rumors of his sending financial aid, and even troops. We must act quickly.

(beat)

We must replace the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, and send additional troops immediately, majesty.

ELIZABETH

Replace? With whom?

William Cecil hesitates slightly, then--

WILLIAM CECIL

I would recommend the Earl of Essex, your majesty.

ELIZABETH

Essex? To Ireland?

(frowns)

For how long?

WILLIAM CECIL

As long as the present crisis warrants, majesty.

ELIZABETH

Impossible. He cannot be spared. We feel his counsel is of greater import with each passing day.

Not what William Cecil wanted to hear.

WILLIAM CECIL

I only recommend we send your most able subjects where they are most needed, majesty.

(beat, a last-ditch effort)

Philip of Spain dreams still of taking your kingdom from you.

(MORE)

WILLIAM CECIL (CONT'D)

Of burning you at the stake as a heretic. Give him a foot-hold in Ireland, and--

ELIZABETH

But Essex?

WILLIAM CECIL

Essex's martial abilities are, in my opinion, the only antidote to the plague of Philip.

(clears his throat)

Though, Essex would not, unfortunately, be able to remain in the Privy Council if he is in Ireland...

ELIZABETH

And who would you advise to replace him?

Three ladies-in-waiting approach with three different gown. Elizabeth studies them as:

WILLIAM CECIL

Sir Robert Cecil.

ELIZABETH

Your son?

WILLIAM CECIL

He is my own advisor first, my son second, majesty. His counsel has been invaluable to me, and no doubt will be to you as well.

Elizabeth points to one of the dresses, and waves the handmaidens away.

ELIZABETH

Yes, yes, yes. We will send Essex to Ireland and place Robert on my Privy Council.

But William's flash of victory is dampened by--

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

I saw a play this last weekend, William. It made me think of... days long past. Of memories... long past. Long past. I should like to see more of them...  
Has Edward been happy, William? With your daughter?

William Cecil doesn't answer. Instead he thinks, remembers, as we hear his younger voice...

WILLIAM CECIL (O.S.)

Murdered!

CUT TO:

40

INT. CECIL HOUSE - GREAT HALL - DAY

40

Thirty years earlier.

William Cecil is standing in front of an enormous fireplace, pacing in a pique of anger.

WILLIAM CECIL

By your own hand!

YOUNG OXFORD

He was stealing my poems.

WILLIAM CECIL

He was doing my bidding!

YOUNG OXFORD

Yours?

WILLIAM CECIL

Of course. As soon as Robert informed me that you were disobeying my express--

YOUNG OXFORD

Robert? Robert told--

William Cecil SLAMS his fists on a table.

WILLIAM CECIL

Enough! Thou shalt not worship false idols in my household! Your everlasting soul hangs in the balance. Not poems. Your soul!

YOUNG OXFORD

My poems are my soul!

William Cecil turns away in frustration as much as disgust.

WILLIAM CECIL

You have placed me in a grave position, Edward.

(MORE)

46

WILLIAM CECIL (CONT'D)

I cannot have my reputation soiled by this regrettable lack of control on your part... No. I will not have it. We can claim self-defense, he drew sword first.

(beat)

But... I wish something in return.

Young Oxford looks worried.

WILLIAM CECIL (CONT'D)

My daughter is young, impressionable. She has feelings for you, Edward. It is to be expected, living in such close quarters...

YOUNG OXFORD

Sir. For the last three years you have managed to seize much of my inheritance--

WILLIAM CECIL

Hold your tongue, Edward, before you make a claim you cannot retract! I have been legally reimbursed for your education and living expenses.

YOUNG OXFORD

And now you suggest you be "reimbursed" the rest of my once considerable estates through your daughter's bed?

William Cecil studies Young Oxford's face.

WILLIAM CECIL

No. This is how I suggest you keep your noble head from the executioner's block.

YOUNG OXFORD

stares at him. The SOUND of CHURCH BELLS RINGING takes us to:

41 INT. WESTMINSTER ABBEY - DAY

41

And Young Oxford and Anne are being married by a bishop.

BISHOP

...and in the fear of god, duly considering the causes for which matrimony was ordained. One was the procreation of children...

WILLIAM CECIL

appears triumphant. He looks beaming over to...

BISHOP (CONT'D)

...to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord and praise of God. Secondly, it was ordained for a remedy against sin.

YOUNG ELIZABETH

Who presides over the whole affair. The first time we see a dress on her which makes her truly regal.

BISHOP (CONT'D)

Thirdly, for the mutual society, help and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity, into the which holiest state these two persons present come now to be joined.

AT THE ALTAR

Young Anne looks at her young husband, lovingly. Young Oxford is a bit overwhelmed and unsure of it all. And then we HEAR a trumpet BLARING, which takes us to:

42 INT. THE ROSE THEATER - DAY

42

Thirty-two years later.

Vendors hawk food and drink as they walk through the audience.

IN OXFORD'S BOX

Oxford sits, Francesco behind him, exhilarated by the scene below him.

IN THE GALLERIES

Marlowe, Dekker and Nashe are looking at their single-sheet programs.

NASHE

"Henry V" by... No one?

MARLOWE

And why would any of you admit to trying to better me in a historical drama? Comedy, yes, tragedy, perhaps. But never will one of you best me in historicals.

Marlowe takes a swig of ale, and spots Jonson coming to join them.

MARLOWE (CONT'D)

Or will we be seeing a most hysterical historical?

Jonson sits next to Marlowe.

MARLOWE (CONT'D)

Hmm? Ben? Waiting to see how it's received before you lay claim??

Before Jonson can answer--

ON STAGE

An actor, CONDELL (40's), dressed all in white (even his face is painted white) enters stage. He is "Prologue". He addresses the audience directly.

"PROLOGUE"

Oh, for a muse of fire, that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention. A kingdom for a stage, princes to act, and monarchs to behold the swelling scene! Then should warlike Harry, like himself, assume the port of Mars, and at his heels should famine, sword, and fire crouch for his employment. Can this cockpit hold the vasty fields of France?

IN THE GALLERIES

Jonson seems surprised. This is not what he expected. This is *good*.

CUT TO:

HORSE HOOVES

as they POUND on cobblestone. We are:

43 EXT. THE ENGLISH COUNTRY-SIDE - DAY 43

And Southampton is riding his horse at full gallop through the countryside. About two dozen retainers follow, the first few with Southampton's coat-of-arms on flags.

44 INT. THE ROSE THEATER - DAY 44

It is later in the play.

On stage, about 15 actors are in full battle armor. They include: "HENRY V", played by the actor called Spencer, "WESTMORELAND", "EXETER", "SALISBURY". All the men on stage now wear battle armor.

"HENRY V"

This day is called the feast of Crispian: he that outlives this day, and comes safe home, will stand a tip-toe when this day is named, and rouse him at the name of Crispian.

IN THE GALLERIES

Marlowe, Dekker, Nashe and Jonson all watch, obviously impressed. Nashe takes a swig of Ale.

IN OXFORD'S BOX

Oxford watches, loving the stagecraft involved in the production.

"HENRY V" (CONT'D)

He that shall see this day and live t'old age, will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbors, and say 'Tomorrow is Saint Crispian.

ON STAGE

"Henry V" speaks to his men.

"HENRY V" (CONT'D)

Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars.

The actor playing "Henry" kneels at the front of the stage. He speaks to the groundlings as though they are his troops.

"HENRY V" (CONT'D)

And say 'These wounds I had on  
Crispin's day.' Old men forget: yet  
all shall be forgot, but he'll  
remember with advantages what feats he  
did that day. This story shall the  
good man teach his son.

THE GROUNDINGS

become literally spellbound.

"HENRY V" (CONT'D)

And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go  
by, from this day to the ending of the  
world, but we in it shall be  
remembered; we few, we happy few, we  
band of brothers; for he to-day that  
sheds his blood with me shall be my  
brother; be he ne'er so vile, this day  
shall gentle his condition: and  
gentlemen in England now a-bed shall  
think themselves accursed they were  
not here, and hold their man-hoods  
cheap whiles any speaks that fought  
with us upon Saint Crispin's day!

The entire audience stands and CHEERS madly.

OXFORD

watches, with a pride he has never felt.

IN THE GALLERIES

The "wits" look at each other amazed.

ON STAGE

"SALISBURY"

My sovereign lord, bestow yourself  
with speed. The French are bravely in  
their battles set and will with all  
expedience charge on us.

"HENRY V"

All things are ready, if our minds be  
so.

"WESTMORELAND"

Perish the man whose mind is backward  
now!

"HENRY V"

You know your places: God be with you  
all!

THE "HUT"

which is a round tower on top of the stage, contains  
several small cannons manned by stagehands. They shoot  
BLANK CANNON SHOTS.

45 EXT. THE CITY GATES OF LONDON - DAY 45

Southampton and his retainers gallop through a City  
gate. Above the gate, the severed heads of murderers  
sit on pikes.

46 INT. THE ROSE THEATER - DAY 46

Actors portraying French soldiers STORM the stage,  
swords brandished. "Henry" and his men begin fighting  
them, their swordplay elaborate and impressive.

47 EXT. LONDON BRIDGE - DAY 47

Southampton and his entourage gallop over London  
Bridge.

48 INT. THE ROSE THEATER - DAY 48

The battle rages on stage.

One hardy audience member starts to actually ATTACK one  
of the French "soldiers" himself. He's quickly joined  
by a few comrades-- and it quickly becomes a madhouse;  
half play, half real fight, as more audience members  
join the "battle". The play quickly degenerates into a  
bloody brawl between actors and audience.

49 EXT/INT. ROSE THEATER - DAY 49

Southampton arrives at the theater. He jumps off his  
horse, and hurries--

INTO THE STAIRWELL

jumping two steps at a time. We HEAR the sound of  
APPLAUSE. The play is now over. Southampton hurries  
into--

OXFORD'S BOX

He sees Oxford, who is applauding. All the actors of the play are taking their bows.

SOUTHAMPTON

William Cecil's convinced the Queen that only Essex can save Ireland from the Revolt.

Oxford processes this.

SOUTHAMPTON (CONT'D)

I've pledged to go with him, Edward. We sail in an hour.

OXFORD

Henry--

SOUTHAMPTON

I ask for your blessing, Edward.

OXFORD

I can't give it to you.

IN THE GALLERIES

NASHE

I for one wish to see this anonymous colleague of ours.

(stands)

Playwright! Playwright!!

Marlowe and others join in. And--

BACKSTAGE

Shakespeare, standing next to a small table of props, quickly dips his fingers in an inkwell to make them stained. He grabs a large feathered quill and tucks a piece of parchment under his arm, then hurries--

ON STAGE

--where he bows deeply, loving the adulation.

IN OXFORD'S BOX

SOUTHAMPTON

If he is to be my king, then it is my sacred duty to be with him in battle.

Oxford tries to understand Southampton, but then notices Shakespeare on stage. His mouth opens in shock, and he turns to look across the theater at--

JONSON

who guiltily looks away. Marlowe's mouth is open, his hands stop applauding.

IN OXFORD'S BOX

Southampton is angered by Oxford's distraction.

SOUTHAMPTON (CONT'D)

I am sorry to have disturbed your entertainment.

And he exits.

OXFORD

Henry-- Henry!!

But the younger man is gone.

ON STAGE

Shakespeare bows, then--

SHAKESPEARE

I, I... It's been... I, I, want to... thank my actors, whose great acting brought... my words... to life due to their most finest acting. Ah... Thank you.

OXFORD (O.S.)

An actor?!!

CUT TO:

50

INT. OXFORD STONE - STUDY - DAY

50

The multi-arched ceiling is painted blue with gold stars. Globes-- both terrestrial and astral-- abound.

Jonson stands in front of a very angry Oxford.

OXFORD

An *actor* for god's sake?

JONSON

My lord, I thought that--

54

OXFORD

You presumed to think? On my behalf?  
Whatever made you believe you had that  
prerogative?

A beat. Jonson is a bit afraid.

JONSON

My lord, your voice is completely  
different than mine. My, my, my  
characters are--

OXFORD

Voice? You have no voice! That's why  
I chose you!  
(beat, softer)  
You at least kept my name from him?

Jonson NODS.

OXFORD (CONT'D)

And will continue to do so?

Oxford studies him, believes him. Then he opens a  
cabinet.

In it, manuscript after manuscript are stacked. Jonson  
looks behind him, stunned by the number.

Oxford looks up and down the cabinet. He pulls one  
out, decides no, and puts it back, looking for just the  
right one... He pulls another out, then hands it to  
Jonson.

OXFORD (CONT'D)

A romantic tragedy. In iambic  
pentameter.

JONSON

(amazed)  
All, my lord? Is that possible?

OXFORD

Of course it is!

51 INT. OXFORD STONE - HALLWAY - DAY

51

Jonson exits Oxford's study, still amazed at the  
manuscript as he walks.

He passes ANNE, Oxford's wife (now 40's), who is on her  
way to the study with their eldest daughter, BRIDGET  
(17).

55

She watches him go by and immediately realizes that she has seen him before. But she stays silent.

52

INT. OXFORD STONE - STUDY - DAY

52

Oxford is writing at a desk as Anne enters.

ANNE

Who was that man? I've seen him before.

Oxford holds up a finger to prevent her from speaking while he finishes writing a thought. It's a long thought. Anne is obviously annoyed, and interrupts him.

ANNE (CONT'D)

Edward-- we must discuss our Bridget's dowry.

OXFORD

(looking up - confused)  
Dowry?

He remembers when he spies his daughter.

ANNE

She cannot go into marriage without a dowry that is becoming to the daughter of the Earl Oxford.

OXFORD

I can give her Brooke House and a hundred pounds.

BRIDGET

A hundred pounds? Father? Mother!

OXFORD

That is all we have to give at the moment.

The matter over, Oxford goes back to his writing.

ANNE

(furious)

Edward. Edward! Speak to me! Our family is in financial ruins, and, and you, you play the flute while Rome burns!

Oxford turns.

OXFORD

Nero *fiddled* whilst Rome burned.

And then he goes back to writing.

ANNE

For god's sake, who cares Edward?  
When your own daughter can't even have  
a suitable dowry?

She stares at him.

ANNE (CONT'D)

My god, you're writing again, aren't  
you? After you agreed-- after my  
father expressly forbade it!

Oxford turns to her, full of emotion

OXFORD

Anne-- If you could have seen them--  
the mob... They, they didn't just sit  
there like the reptilia of court,  
faces motionless, fangs momentarily  
retracted. No! They, they jumped on  
stage, they fought the French! A  
butcher-- he actually broke his arm!  
He was so--

ANNE

Stop! Stop it at once!!

Anne storms over and grabs the parchment from under  
him, and begins RIPPING it up.

ANNE (CONT'D)

Why!? Why must you write?! Why must  
you continue to humiliate this family?

He stares at her, almost uncomprehendingly. Then--

OXFORD

The voices, Anne... The voices. I, I  
can't stop them... They, they come  
when I sleep, when I wake, when I sup,  
when I, I, I walk down a hall! The  
sweet longings of a maiden, the, the  
surging ambitions of a courtier, the  
foul designs of a murderer, the  
wretched pleas of his victims. Only--  
- only when I put their words-- their  
voices-- to parchment are they cast  
loose, freed... Only then is my  
mind... quieted... at peace.

Anne steps back, frightened of him.

OXFORD (CONT'D)  
I... would go mad if I didn't write  
down the voices.

She stares at him, horrified.

ANNE  
Art thou possessed?

He stares back at her. A long beat

OXFORD  
I... don't know.

SHAKESPEARE (O.S.)  
"Two households, both alike in  
dignity, In fair Verona, where we lay  
our scene"

53

EXT. LONDON BRIDGE - DAY

53

Shakespeare and Jonson are walking along London Bridge--  
the only bridge that spanned the Thames at the time, it  
is a street lined with multi-storied buildings-- almost  
like a mall.

Shakespeare carries and reads from a manuscript of  
"Romeo and Juliet"

SHAKESPEARE  
"From ancient grudge break to new  
mutiny, Where civil blood makes civil  
hands unclean."  
(no longer reading)  
Incredible!! The whole bloody thing  
in verse?!

JONSON  
(nonchalant)  
It's really not that difficult, if you  
try.

SHAKESPEARE  
And have you ever tried?

Jonson gives him a sharp look, and pauses to pick some  
onions from a stand.

Shakespeare notices a BUXOM BLONDE women selling apples  
at the next stand.

58

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)  
(performing for the  
Blonde)

"But soft, what light through yonder  
window breaks?  
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.  
Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious  
moon,  
Who is already sick and pale with  
grief, That thou her maid art far more  
fair than she."

The Buxom Blonde smiles at Shakespeare seductively.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)  
(to Jonson)  
I'll have little trouble parting the  
legs of barmaids after that  
performance!

JONSON  
You can't play Romeo.

Jonson leaves the stall, and continues down the street.  
Shakespeare hesitates, then gives the girl a dazzling  
smile. She smiles back, then Shakespeare runs after  
Jonson.

SHAKESPEARE  
(to Jonson)  
Why not? I won't let that oaf Spencer  
have another go at one of my roles.  
No-- only Will Shakespeare can pump  
the life into Romeo's veins.  
(grins at another passing  
girl)  
And his cod piece!  
(beat, desperate)  
Ben-- Ben! I'm an actor, every inch  
of me, down to my very toes... I want--  
no, I need, *crave*-- to act. I can't  
just idle the day by with--

JONSON  
So bloody well act like a writer! And  
for God's sake, keep off the stage.  
Writers don't have time to act.

DISSOLVE TO:

54 INT. THE ROSE THEATER - DAY

54

A performance of "Romeo and Juliet". About a dozen actors are dancing. It is Act 1, Scene 5. "ROMEO", played by Spencer, is staring longingly at "Juliet". "Romeo" turns to his servant.

"ROMEO"

What lady's that, which doth enrich  
the hand of yonder knight?

"SERVANT"

I know not, sir.

"ROMEO"

O, she doth teach the torches to burn  
bright! It seems she hangs upon the  
cheek of night like a rich jewel in an  
Ethiop's ear; beauty too rich for use,  
for earth too dear!

The actor playing Romeo plays to the women in the audience. And

THE WOMEN

respond, eye lashes twittering.

THE WITS

Watch in awe! Now they're all taking swigs of ale.

BACKSTAGE

Shakespeare mouthing silently the lines of "Romeo".

IN OXFORD'S BOX

Oxford watches the dance carefully.

"ROMEO" (CONT'D)

Did my heart love till now? Forswear  
it, sight! For I ne'er saw true  
beauty till this night.

DISSOLVE TO:

55 INT. RICHMOND PALACE - GREAT HALL - NIGHT

55

Twenty-eight years earlier. A dance is taking place.

YOUNG OXFORD-- now 20 is dancing with Young Anne. But his eyes are on:

60

Young Elizabeth, who is dancing with the Spanish  
AMBASSADOR.

YOUNG ELIZABETH

seems less than interested in her dancing partner. She  
STARES intently back at Young Oxford.

WIDER

There is a natural change in the music, and all the  
dancers switch partners-- it's part of the dance.  
Young Oxford goes to Young Elizabeth, the Spanish  
Ambassador goes to Anne.

YOUNG ELIZABETH AND YOUNG OXFORD

stare into each others eyes as they dance the intricate  
moves.

YOUNG ELIZABETH  
My lord of Oxford.

Elizabeth smiles.

YOUNG ELIZABETH (CONT'D)  
We liked your play tonight very much.  
Your young King Henry reminded us of  
you.

OXFORD  
Did he?

YOUNG ELIZABETH  
Rash, yet brave. A boy-- and yet a  
man. Fair on the eyes, fairer to the  
ear...

WIDER

Much of the Court is watching this. They can tell  
there are sparks between them.

All the dancers change partners, including Elizabeth  
and Oxford. A few dance moves, and Oxford once again  
finds himself with Elizabeth.

YOUNG ELIZABETH (CONT'D)  
We are glad of your return from the  
continent. Two years is far too long  
to be without such excellent  
amusements.

Young Oxford dips his head slightly in acknowledgment.

YOUNG OXFORD

If I had known my absence would cause  
your grace so much... longing, I would  
have returned much-- much-- sooner.

Was that a come-on? Young Elizabeth decides to find  
out.

YOUNG ELIZABETH

Your wife must be much pleased by your  
presence once more at her side...

Young Oxford glances over at--

YOUNG ANNE

who is now dancing with the Spanish Ambassador. But  
she watches Young Elizabeth and Young Oxford with a  
great deal of jealousy.

WILLIAM CECIL

Follows his daughter's look. He doesn't like what he  
sees any more than Young Anne does.

BACK TO YOUNG ELIZABETH AND YOUNG OXFORD

Still dancing.

YOUNG OXFORD

If she is, it is but a small comfort  
to me. I am returned only under my  
father-in-law's insistence.

A beat as this sinks in.

YOUNG ELIZABETH

(surprised)

Cecil had told me your match was one  
of love.

YOUNG OXFORD

And so he would wish.

(long beat)

But how could one ever love the moon,  
after having first seen the sun?

He stares intensely into her eyes. And she stares  
right back.

DISSOLVE TO:

57 EXT. RICHMOND PALACE - BALCONY - DAY 57

Three Ladies-in-waiting run onto the balcony to join Bessie, who is looking across the palace grounds, watching--

56 EXT. RICHMOND PALACE - FOREST - SAME TIME 56

Young Elizabeth and Young Oxford, both on horseback, unaccompanied, trot over a small bridge.

56A EXT. RICHMOND PALACE - BALCONY - SAME TIME 56A

The Ladies-in-waiting giggle, but are interrupted by--

WILLIAM CECIL (O.S.)  
Where is her majesty?

Bessie turns to William Cecil.

BESSIE  
My lord. Her majesty went riding with the Earl of Oxford.

The Ladies-in-waiting share knowing smiles.

56B EXT. RICHMOND PALACE - FOREST - SAME TIME 56B

Young Elizabeth and Young Oxford share flirty glances, and then Young Elizabeth spurs her horse to a gallop, and dashes into the fog. Young Oxford immediately follows.

CUT TO:

58 INT. A ROYAL TENT - LATER 58

A servant places a silver plate filled with shucked oysters onto a table filled with quail, venison, wine, etc...

Young Elizabeth sits across from Young Oxford. It's just the two of them dining.

YOUNG ELIZABETH  
And which country did you like the most on your travels, my lord?

YOUNG OXFORD  
I think Italy, your grace.

YOUNG ELIZABETH

And why is that? The weather? The food?

YOUNG OXFORD

No their theater, which they call la Commedia dell'arte. And, of course, the women.

She raises an eyebrow.

YOUNG ELIZABETH

The women?

YOUNG OXFORD

They were more... clear with their desires than our English ladies. When they want something, they take it. They do not wait to be taken...

SLOW DISSOLVE TO:

59 OMIT 59

60 INT. RICHMOND PALACE - RECEIVING CHAMBER - NIGHT 60

A door SLAMS open, and Young Elizabeth and Young Oxford dash in, ripping each others clothes off in the fireplace-lit room.

Young Elizabeth gently pushes Young Oxford towards her throne... She kisses him. Then begin to make love. On the throne.

DISSOLVE TO:

LATER

Postcoital, the fire still lit. Young Elizabeth is half asleep, half awake, nestled in furs in front of the fireplace... much like Titania in "Midsummer Night's Dream"...

Young Oxford watches her as she stirs and wakes. She smiles at him.

YOUNG ELIZABETH

I can't decide. Are you Prince Hal...? Or Romeo? No. Benedick, maybe...?  
No--

(MORE)

YOUNG ELIZABETH (CONT'D)  
(smiles)

--Puck

YOUNG OXFORD  
(smiles)

Puck?

YOUNG ELIZABETH  
Yes, Puck!

She's only teasing.

YOUNG OXFORD  
Ah, but Puck would never fight for you  
in the Netherlands...

YOUNG ELIZABETH  
(surprised, smiles)  
The Netherlands?

But then she realizes he's serious, and the smile  
vanishes.

YOUNG OXFORD  
Well, why not? It's an open secret on  
the continent that you support the  
rebels against Spain-- and that you  
are commissioning Englishmen to help  
their cause. Spain's loss is  
England's gain, is it not?

Her eyes narrow as she studies his face.

YOUNG ELIZABETH  
Is this why you bedded me? For a  
commission?

YOUNG OXFORD  
No. No-- of course not-- I--

She stands, wrapped in her sheets, furious at the  
thought of once more being used.

YOUNG ELIZABETH  
Leave me. Leave at once!

A beat.

YOUNG OXFORD  
Bess--

YOUNG ELIZABETH  
How dare you! How dare you!! I  
command you to leave my presence.

And she steps back, waiting for him to exit.

Young Oxford stands... and starts to approach her...  
He's nude, his back to us.

She steps back, a bit stunned by his impertinence. He  
steps towards her as--

YOUNG OXFORD

O Mistress mine, where are you  
roaming?  
O stay and hear... your true-love's  
coming,  
That can--  
(looks up and down her  
body)  
--kiss both high and low...

A bit stunned by his approach, she stumbles backwards  
on her sheets.

YOUNG OXFORD (CONT'D)

Trip no further, pretty sweeting....

But he's sexy... and naked. And spouting poetry. She  
stops retreating and allows his approach.

YOUNG OXFORD (CONT'D)

Journeys end in lovers' meeting--  
Every wise man's son doth know.

A small smile escapes her lips.

YOUNG OXFORD (CONT'D)

What is love? 'tis not hereafter;  
Present mirth hath present laughter;  
What's to come is still unsure:

He starts to kiss her neck. Cautiously at first. But  
she likes it.

YOUNG OXFORD (CONT'D)

In delay there lies no plenty--  
Then come kiss me, Sweet-and-twenty,  
Youth's a stuff will not endure.

She responds to him, melting from both his words and  
touch. They start to kiss deeply, passionately... And--  
-

YOUNG ELIZABETH

(passionately)  
You will stay in England... And in...  
my chambers...

The flash of disappointment on Young Oxford's face about that last bit is tempered by Young Elizabeth's sheet falling to the floor. They begin to make love passionately once more.

NASHE (O.S.)  
I could do it if I wanted to...

61

INT. THE MERMAID'S TAVERN - DAY

61

Twenty-seven years later. Jonson, Marlowe, Dekker and Nashe sit silently at a table, mugs of ale in hand. Having just returned from "Romeo and Juliet", all are a bit in shock. The actors from the performance are there as well in the BG.

MARLOWE  
(to Nashe)  
Do what?

NASHE  
(a little drunk)  
A play in iambic, in iambic pen...in-  
bic-pentameter. It's not that hard.

JONSON  
Think you so? Have you ever tried?

NASHE  
Of course not. But I could if I  
wanted...

DEKKER  
It wasn't all in verse.

NASHE  
Ha! See! Even easier!

Shakespeare enters and makes a bee line for them.

SHAKESPEARE  
(excited)  
Henslowe wants "Romeo" to run a  
fortnight.  
(unbelievable news)  
A fortnight! Innkeeper! A round for  
everybody! Inkeeper!!  
(no response)  
Billy!!!

And Shakespeare goes over to the bar.

67

NASHE

A fortnight?

DEKKER

The maids love the romantic tragedies.

MARLOWE

Precisely why I avoid them.

NASHE

Aw, well. No worries. A one-trick pony. He'll never be able to do it again.

62 INT./EXT. THE ROSE THEATER - DAY

62

A MONTAGE of various plays:

"TWELFTH NIGHT"

Viola and Sebastian are reunited...

"CAESAR"

Caesar is attacked by Brutus, Cinna, Cassius, etc...

"MACBETH"

The witches are on stage.

These three performances are INTER-CUT with:

PLAYBILLS

outside the Rose, announcing each play's title. At first, Shakespeare's name is small, with each succeeding play his name gets bigger. And--

AFTER EACH PERFORMANCE

Shakespeare bows to the ever-increasing applause of his audience. He looks up to see the Mermaid's Wits all watching him with stony silence.

And as each play is seen, Jonson and the rest of the Wits seem more and more depressed.

And after each performance, Shakespeare seems to be greeted with more and more adulation.

The MONTAGE ends with...

A PLAYBILL

in front of the theater announcing "William Shakespeare's Hamlet". Shakespeare's name is now above the title. We HEAR the audience howl with LAUGHTER as--

63 INT. ROSE THEATER - DAY 63

An actor playing "POLONIUS" does an obvious caricature of William Cecil, dressed in black with an exaggerated rendition of Cecil's beard.

"POLONIUS"  
(over-acting)  
...Beware of entrance to a quarrel,  
but being in, bear it that the opposed  
may beware of thee. Give every man  
thy ear, but few thy voice, take each  
man's censure, but reserve thy  
judgment....

64 INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - AUDIENCE CHAMBER - DAY 64

Elizabeth watches the same play at a court performance. We see Elizabeth smiling amused as "Polinous" continues his rant...

"POLINOUS"  
....Costly thy habit as thy purse can  
buy, but not expressed in fancy, rich,  
nor gaudy, for the apparel oft  
proclaims the man. This above all, to  
thine own self be true.

Elizabeth absent mindedly starts to scratch her chest, irritated by some sort of itch, but still focused on the play.

65 INT. ROSE THEATER - DAY 65

Jonson watches tight lipped...

The character of GERTRUDE", the Queen, is joined by "HAMLET". "Polonius" is behind a curtain, listening in, and is seen by the audience. "Hamlet" appears enraged.

"GERTRUDE"  
What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not  
murder me? Help, ho!

"POLONIUS"  
(behind curtain)  
What ho, help!

"Hamlet" draws his sword.

"HAMLET"  
How now? A rat? Dead, for a ducat,  
dead!

"Hamlet" stabs "Polonius" through the curtain.

"POLONIUS"  
O, I am slain.

"Polonius" emerges from behind the curtain, covered in  
pig's blood, and dies an anguished death.

There is stunned silence in the audience. And then one  
lone Groundling CLAPS, then another, then the whole  
audience.

GROUNDLING  
Not a day too soon for old Cecil!!

66

INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - AUDIENCE CHAMBER - DAY

66

Elizabeth is still scratching her chest, but more  
vigorously as some of the members of court give  
uncomfortable glances at each other over the death of  
William Cecil-- er "Polonius" onstage.

"GERTRUDE"  
O me, what hast thou done?

"HAMLET"  
Nay, I know not. Is it the King?

"HAMLET" (CONT'D)  
Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool,  
farewell! I took thee for thy better:  
take thy fortune; Thou find'st to be  
too busy is some danger. Leave  
wringing of your hands: peace! sit you  
down, And let me wring your heart; for  
so I shall, If it be made of  
penetrable stuff,  
If damned custom have not brass'd it  
so  
That it is proof and bulwark against  
sense.

70

Elizabeth can't take the itching anymore. She RIPS open her bodice and violently scratches some sort of rash on her chest.

67

INT/EXT. ROSE THEATER - DAY

67

Oxford is in his usual box, but completely alone. He has a smile of satisfaction on his lips while...

JONSON

Looks over to Oxford with astonishment... While on stage the world sees for the first time "Hamlet" contemplating suicide.

"HAMLET"

To be, or not to be: that is the question: whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them...

Loud thunder and...

RAIN STARTS TO FALL

And as only the stage and the galleries are covered, the groundlings are pelted with the cold drops of water. But they stay. They stay. They cover themselves up, and silently watch on.

"HAMLET"

...To die, to sleep- no more- and by a sleep to say we end the heartache, and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to...

The audience-- soaked, pelted with rain-- watches immobile.

And then a again a loud thunder clap takes us to the end of the play...

SHAKESPEARE

Bows to the thunderous applause. It is still raining, but nobody wants to leave. While-

THE MERMAID'S WITS

watch in the crowd, a complex range of emotions, but jealousy and loathing at the top of the list.

71

ON STAGE

some of the audience members grab Shakespeare, and pull him on their shoulders, carrying him triumphantly out of the theater.

CUT TO:

68 EXT. STREET IN FRONT OF TOWER OF LONDON - DAY 68

Marlowe walks towards the Tower of London.

68A INT. TOWER OF LONDON / POLE'S ROOM - DAY 68A

Silence....Marlowe is waiting patiently...

He is sitting across from Pole, the Captain of the Guard, who is reading his report....

POLE  
(looks up)  
Are you certain of this?  
(almost confused)  
William Cecil was murdered?

MARLOWE  
Not literally, of course. He was a character, a fictional character. But the metaphor was clear for anyone to see. And see, they did.

Pole reads more from the parchment.

MARLOWE (CONT'D)  
Will you shut it down?

Pole continues to read.

POLE  
That is not for me to decide...

He brings out a pouch of coins, and tosses it across the table.

POLE (CONT'D)  
Your service to his lordship is once again greatly appreciated.

Marlowe takes the pouch of money.

ROBERT CECIL (O.S.)  
He butchered you!

69

INT. CECIL HOUSE - WILLIAM CECIL'S STUDY - DAY

69

Robert Cecil is furious, pacing back and forth in front of William Cecil, who sits behind a large wooden desk.

William Cecil is pale and sweaty-- he is deathly ill, and sits in a wooden chair with small spoked wheels attached to the legs-- sort of an Elizabethan wheelchair.

ROBERT CECIL  
Not only in front of Court! But the entire City as well! We must arrest this Shakespeare and-

WILLIAM CECIL  
No, Robert, think. If he is really as popular as you say, we would only anger the mob. No. We must strike at Edward directly.

William Cecil slowly-- and shakily-- bends down from his chair as--

ROBERT CECIL  
But we cannot maintain our authority if the mob thinks us laughing stocks--

WILLIAM CECIL  
(angry)  
Our authority comes from Elizabeth and from God! Elizabeth! Elizabeth is the key to all.

Robert Cecil looks hurt by his father's anger.

WILLIAM CECIL (CONT'D)  
(gentler)  
Robert... You must think deeper. You must compensate. Compensate for your... malformations... with the gifts God did grant you... With cunning. With ruthlessness.

William Ceci pushes a hidden button on the side of his desk-- a spring loaded secret drawer POPS open. Robert Cecil has never seen it before.

Cecil produces a folded piece of parchment from the drawer, offers it to Robert Cecil.

73

WILLIAM CECIL (CONT'D)  
From King James of Scotland.

Robert Cecil looks surprised.

69A INT. CECIL HOUSE - HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

69A

Robert Cecil is pushing William Cecil in his wheelchair. They are completely alone.

WILLIAM CECIL  
James knows of the Queen's affection for Essex... and the rumors of his birth. He is justly concerned.  
(beat)  
You will reply to him.

ROBERT CECIL  
I will reply to him?

WILLIAM CECIL  
I am dying, Robert--  
(before Robert can protest)  
We both know this to be true. And I will not witness the next coronation.

69B INT. CECIL HOUSE - WILLIAM CECIL'S BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

69B

Robert Cecil wheels his father in.

WILLIAM CECIL  
Help me to my bed, my son.  
(Robert Cecil does so)  
If we are to secure your place at the side of the next king, you must get that king his throne, not I.

A beat as this registers on Robert Cecil.

WILLIAM CECIL (CONT'D)  
You will write to James that I am gravely ill, but that all is in hand. Much of the Privy Council has already secretly agreed to his ascension to the English throne due to your tireless, but secret, entreaties on his behalf.  
(beat)  
And then tell him Essex will not return from Ireland alive.

Robert Cecil looks surprised.

WILLIAM CECIL (CONT'D)  
This is how kings are made, Robert.  
So it was with Elizabeth, and so it  
shall ever be. There were many rival  
claims to her throne, but none  
survived to make their claim. James  
must know that you will do the same  
for him, and he will reward you for  
it.

(beat)  
But we must do one thing more...

William Cecil has a coughing fit-- reaches for a glass  
vial of medicine at his bedside-- takes it.

WILLIAM CECIL (CONT'D)  
Like Essex, Edward must be removed.

ROBERT CECIL  
(confused)  
Edward?

William Cecil is slowly falling asleep...

WILLIAM CECIL  
He uses the tools at his disposal, as  
we use the tools at ours. But ours  
will win... as they always have.

ROBERT CECIL  
(more confused)  
I-- I don't understand, father. What  
does Edward--

WILLIAM CECIL  
Edward seeks what we seek. To choose  
the next King.

Off Robert Cecil's surprised face we hear:

YOUNG ELIZABETH (O.S.)  
I am with child...

CUT TO:

70

INT. RICHMOND PALACE - LONG GALLERY - DUSK

70

Twenty seven years earlier. Young Elizabeth is pacing,  
terribly agitated. Bessie, the lady-in-waiting we have  
seen constantly at her side is the only other person  
present.

75

WILLIAM CECIL  
Are you certain?

Young Elizabeth turns to Bessie.

BESSIE  
Two cycles have passed, my lord.

William Cecil thinks.

YOUNG ELIZABETH  
I wish to marry him...

William Cecil looks startled.

WILLIAM CECIL  
Marry him, your grace? He is already  
married.

YOUNG ELIZABETH  
I can do what I will.

WILLIAM CECIL  
Can you?

She gives him a sharp look.

WILLIAM CECIL (CONT'D)  
Most of the Catholic princes of Europe  
wish to topple you and end your  
Protestant reign... The only things  
that stop them are the channel, and  
the hope that they might marry you,  
and thereby achieve your realm through  
other means.

Young Elizabeth hears him, thinks on it, then begins  
pacing again.

YOUNG ELIZABETH  
I love him...

WILLIAM CECIL  
Would you risk your throne for him?  
Would you risk England for him?

He knows the answer to that.

WILLIAM CECIL (CONT'D)  
We must do as we have done before...  
You must go on Progress, somewhere  
isolated, accompanied by only those  
whom you most trust.  
(MORE)

WILLIAM CECIL (CONT'D)  
After the birth, I will find a  
suitable house for the child to be  
reared in.

Young Elizabeth is uncertain.

YOUNG ELIZABETH  
And Edward?

WILLIAM CECIL  
He must never know.

71 INT. CECIL HOUSE - PRIVATE CHAPEL - DAY

71

A simple, cold space, like William Cecil himself.  
William Cecil is alone in prayer. A few beats, then he  
senses he is not alone. He turns and sees Young Oxford  
(still 20).

YOUNG OXFORD  
What have you done?

WILLIAM CECIL  
I am praying.

YOUNG OXFORD  
(ignoring him)  
She won't see me! I've gone to her  
chambers three times, and she will not  
receive me. And now she's gone!

William Cecil regards Young Oxford for a beat, then  
stands.

WILLIAM CECIL  
She's on Progress.

With this he leaves the chapel.

72 INT. CECIL HOUSE - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

72

Young Oxford runs after him.

YOUNG OXFORD  
Where? Where did she go?

William Cecil is silent.

YOUNG OXFORD (CONT'D)  
What did you say to her? Tell me!

WILLIAM CECIL

The Queen does not ask for my advice  
about matters of the heart, Edward.  
If she had, she hardly would have  
chosen you for her pleasure.

He has a point.

WILLIAM CECIL (CONT'D)

You must have known her eye would move  
elsewhere, Edward. It always has.  
You are neither the first, nor the  
last, of her lovers.

Young Oxford looks up at him like a bucket of cold  
water has hit him.

William Cecil stops. He looks at Oxford with a stern  
face.

WILLIAM CECIL (CONT'D)

Go back to my daughter, Edward. She  
will accept you with open arms, as she  
always has. Behave as your great  
title demands you behave. Tend to  
your estates, your investments.

(a beat)

And make me a grandson, an heir!

Off Young Oxford's pained expression.

CUT TO:

73

INT. MERMAID'S TAVERN - NIGHT

73

Twenty-seven years later. Jonson is alone, trying to  
write at a small table, though it's obvious from his  
fits and starts and crossing outs that he is having  
difficulty.

MARLOWE (O.S.)

It's difficult to write, isn't it?  
After watching something like  
"Hamlet"...

Jonson looks up. Marlowe sits, uninvited. Jonson  
looks annoyed at the interruption.

MARLOWE (CONT'D)

I've seen you watch him. Will.  
During a performance. It eats at  
you... at your soul...

78

Jonson stares at him, his answer obvious.

MARLOWE (CONT'D)

Why do you think Will hasn't been arrested? You or I make the slightest joke about a nobleman of no consequence, and we find ourselves in a cell quicker than a fart spreads in the trade winds. Will-- he murders a caricature of old William Cecil himself, and still whores all the way to Westminster and back.

JONSON

(shrugs)

Perhaps they haven't noticed..

Jonson gets up and walks towards the door.

MARLOWE

I made sure they did...

Jonson turns around.

JONSON

You informed on one of your own? To the Tower?

MARLOWE

Watch who you judge, Ben, for as God is my witness, you may well find yourself doing the same before you meet your maker. We do what we have to, to survive, and survive well, in this life. All of us. And Will is definitely not one of us. You know he's illiterate, don't you?

Jonson is stunned.

MARLOWE (CONT'D)

No? Oh, he can read well enough-- how else could he learn his lines? But the man never actually learned to form his letters.

JONSON

Why are you here, Kit?

MARLOWE

(smiles)

So who did write it? You? No. You'd take credit for it. No...

(MORE)

MARLOWE (CONT'D)

It must be someone who wants their  
anonymity protected. Someone who  
might even pay to have it protected.

Jonson is getting nervous.

MARLOWE (CONT'D)

A nobleman.

Jonson looks up. Marlowe smiles, knowing he is closer  
to the truth.

MARLOWE (CONT'D)

But which? You know, don't you, Ben?

JONSON

You've had too much to drink, Kit.  
You're beginning to sound like one of  
your plays.

Jonson stands and hurries out of the Tavern.

73A EXT. BANKSIDE LONDON - MOMENTS LATER

73A

Jonson heads down the street, Marlowe chasing after  
him.

MARLOWE

Ben! Tell me. We can go to him  
together. Guarantee his anonymity...  
for a price.

JONSON

You reported on me as well, didn't  
you, Kit? Last year. That's why I  
was arrested, wasn't it? Because you  
went to the Tower?

MARLOWE

(lying)

Ben, Ben... I had nothing to do with  
that.

Jonson studies Marlowe for a beat and then walks away.

MARLOWE (CONT'D)

Ben-- I'll just go to Will! He'll  
tell me because he has so much more to  
lose than you. Fame. Fortune. And  
you'll profit nothing from it.  
Nothing!

But Jonson is gone.

74

EXT. MILITARY CAMP - IRELAND - DAY

74

A military encampment with dozens of tents on a cliff by the Irish seaside.

CLOSER

Essex's tent is larger, and guarded. An OLD SERVANT carrying a tray with a silver pitcher approaches. A guard opens the tent for him to enter.

INT. ESSEX'S TENT - CONTINUOUS

Essex is having a Council of War with his generals and senior officers, including Southampton. They all stand around a table, consulting a map of Ireland.

ESSEX

(pointing)

If the Rebels have stripped the northern borders... Then we must march south... and take Cahir Castle...

The SERVANT stays in the background as he pours wine into various goblets. Southampton notices him-- the servant's hand shakes as he pours the wine.

GENERAL

(clears throat,  
uncomfortable)

My lord. 'Tis a well-defended fortress. Two thousand men at least. We cannot--

Southampton notices the Servant's shaking hand slipping into a pocket as--

ESSEX

So what would you have me do? Spend the entire spring encamped? I am sent to Ireland to end this infernal rebellion, not idle my days with--

SOUTHAMPTON

Robert!

In an instant Southampton draws a silver engraved pistol and SHOOTS the servant!

Everyone is shocked-- but then we see:

81

THE SERVANT

had drawn his own, small wooden pistol.

ESSEX

shares a look with Southampton.

75

EXT. OXFORD STONE - GARDEN - DAY

75

To Establish. A foggy day. In the Foreground we see the maze. Oxford and his fencing master, BEAULIEU (20's) are in the center of the maze dueling with rapiers for exercise.

CLOSER

They wear outfits that are slightly more protective than ornamental.

They duel for a few moments, and then Oxford TOUCHES Beaulieu's shoulder. They speak entirely in French.

BEAULIEU

Point!

Oxford backs off, as does the fencing master.

OXFORD

(in French)

Bien. Faisons du travail... le Coup droit d'autorité?

BEAULIEU

Mais oui, mon seigneur.

OXFORD

Bien. En garde!

And they once again begin to duel. But we quickly surmise something is amiss. Beaulieu is much more aggressive than he was before. Oxford realizes it, but is an expert swordsman, and defends himself well.

And then Beaulieu aggressively moves forward, and STABS Oxford in the leg.

OXFORD (CONT'D)

Qu'est ce que vous faites?

But Oxford has little chance to react, because Beaulieu continues his attack.

OXFORD (CONT'D)  
Beaulieu? Beaulieu?!

This has become an assassination attempt, not an exercise.

ENTRANCE OF THE MAZE

Francesco is entering the maze with a silver tray carrying a pitcher and two goblets.

CENTER OF THE MAZE

Though wounded, Oxford is a superior swordsman. And he begins his own attack-- with a ferocity that surprises Beaulieu.

IN THE MAZE

Francesco heads for the center as--

IN THE CENTER OF THE MAZE

Oxford PIERCES Beaulieu's heart with his rapier, and Beaulieu SCREAMS--

IN THE MAZE

Francesco hears the scream, and starts to run.

FRANCESCO  
Signor? Signor?!

IN THE CENTER OF THE MAZE

Oxford collapses as Francesco rushes in.

FRANCESCO (CONT'D)  
Signor? Mio dio! Signor! What has happened--

Oxford checks his leg wound, and glances at the dead Beaulieu. He tries to wave off Francesco's aid, but to no avail as--

OXFORD  
Beaulieu-- he, he tried to kill me...

76

EXT. BANKSIDE LONDON - DAY

76

Jonson, slightly drunk, walks down a street, a whore under his arm, and notices a commotion up ahead: people talking by an alley near the Mermaid's tavern.

83

JONSON  
(to a passer-by)  
What's all that, then?

MAN  
A body...

Jonson peers over and sees:

A BODY

on its back in the alley. Someone turns it over. It's  
MARLOWE, a dried stab-wound in his eye.

JONSON

is stunned.

MAN (CONT'D)  
Must have been a cut-purse. Nowhere's  
bloody safe anymore, I'll tell you  
that...

CUT TO:

77

INT. A BEAR-BAITING THEATER - DAY

77

A small, open air theater where a chained bear is being  
led around the theater. A set of mastiffs are being  
led on the opposite side of the theater.

The spectators are unruly, loudly making bets for the  
mauling to come.

Jonson is among them, taking a look at the bear, deciding  
whether to bet on it or not.

BEAR BAITER  
Sampson! Sired by the great Arthur  
himself! No dog's yet been bred that can  
take him down!

Shakespeare suddenly sits next Jonson hardly notices.

SHAKESPEARE  
I need more money.

JONSON  
More--? You already make more than any  
playwright Bankside.

BEAR BAITER

But then here, good friends, I bring you  
a pack of dogs so fierce, so dangerous,  
that Medusa herself would shrink in fear!

SHAKESPEARE

I'm going to build my own theater, Ben,  
one that fits the scale of my work--

Jonson suddenly turns to him.

JONSON

Your work?

BEAR BAITER

Not a one has had a morsel of food in a  
week! Bred by the great John Sinclow!

A MAN

Fourpence on three dogs!

SHAKESPEARE

They insist only a gentleman can own the  
land.

ANOTHER MAN

A shilling on four!

SHAKESPEARE

The bribes are outrageous, but I found  
some one who will make me a coat-of-arms,  
and change the Stratford lists for me.

JONSON

Impossible.

ANOTHER MAN

Eight shillings on six dogs! Eight  
shillings on six dogs!

JONSON

I'll take that bet!! Eight shillings on  
the bear, six dogs!

ANOTHER MAN

Done!

SHAKESPEARE

Bad bet, that.

JONSON

(to Shakespeare)

You'll have to make do with what  
you've got. I won't be your beggar.

Shakespeare gives him a look to kill.

SHAKESPEARE

This isn't a request, Ben. I'll have more money.

JONSON

Or what? You'll slit my throat like you did Kit's?

MAN

Release the dogs! Release the dogs!

Shakespeare shows no reaction.

JONSON

I know he went to see you last night, Will. And I know he was planning to expose you if you didn't agree to his terms.

IN THE PIT

The bear baiting begins.

WIDER

Shakespeare stares at Jonson.

SHAKESPEARE

(dead serious)

You're mad, Ben. Kit was my friend.

JONSON

Be careful, Will. You kill me off too, and you won't have any good plays to act in after this is all done.

Some of the spectators BOO while others CHEER, and--

SHAKESPEARE

I'll have my guineas, Ben. One way or another, I'll have my guineas.

And he gets up and leaves as the--

DOGS

start to go for the bear's throat. Thge cheering goes to a roar as we--

CUT TO:

SHAKESPEARE

Wears a beard and fake nose. He tries to stay hidden so Jonson doesn't see him. We are:

78 EXT. LONDON BRIDGE - DAY 78

Jonson is waiting not far from him by a stand and drinks an ale.

Then Oxford's servant, Francesco, appears.

After the two men have exchanged couple of words, Francesco gives Jonson a leather folder containing a manuscript and a purse jingling with coin. Jonson takes them and leaves.

Jonson safely gone, Shakespeare starts to follow Francesco who heads back over the bridge.

78A EXT. THE THAMES RIVER - DUSK 78A

Shakespeare is in a small boat following Francesco, who is in Oxford's boat. They head towards Oxford Stone.

EXT. OXFORD STONE - DUSK

Shakespeare watches as Francesco enters Oxford Stone.

79 OMIT 79

CUT TO:

80 INT. OXFORD STONE - STUDY - DUSK 80

Shakespeare is waiting, clearly uncomfortable. It's not the kind of room he's used to being in. He holds his wig and his nose.

A door opens, and Oxford enters, walking on a stick because of his leg injury. He is followed by his servant, Francesco.

OXFORD

So! You are the famous Shakespeare whose labors I have enjoyed so much. I am at your service, sir.

Shakespeare is uncomfortable. He wasn't expecting Oxford himself. Then he just goes for it.

SHAKESPEARE

My lord-- I- I need more money.

OXFORD

(sharp)

I beg your pardon?

SHAKESPEARE

My expenses have, ah, aggrandized... since this all began.

OXFORD

"Aggrandized"?

SHAKESPEARE

And if, if your lordship doesn't agree to an increase in my, ah, fee, I shall be forced to make certain... facts public.

FRANCESCO

Have you any idea to whom you are speaking?

SHAKESPEARE

I am addressing the writer of Hamlet... of Juliet and her Romeo. Am I not?

Oxford is silent. Francesco goes to physically eject Shakespeare from the room.

FRANCESCO

Out. Get out! How dare you insult my master in--

OXFORD

Wait!

(beat)

How much?

Shakespeare looks at Francesco, then Oxford.

SHAKESPEARE

Four hundred pounds. A year.

FRANCESCO

A year?

OXFORD

Pay him.

Francesco is shocked.

OXFORD (CONT'D)  
(impatient, in Italian)  
Pagalo!

Shakespeare smiles.

81 EXT. OXFORD STONE - DUSK 81

Shakespeare exits, tossing a leather pouch filled with coins. He smiles.

82 INT. OXFORD STONE - STUDY - DUSK 82

Oxford watches Shakespeare walk down the road through a window.

FRANCESCO  
Forgive me for speaking of things  
above my place or understanding,  
signor. But... Is this wise? They  
have already tried to kill you once.

OXFORD  
Wisdom, Francesco, is a quality I have  
unfortunately never possessed...

Francesco stares at Oxford who is deep in thought.

The sound of heated love making takes us to...

83 INT. CECIL HOUSE - YOUNG OXFORD'S BEDROOM - NIGHT 83

Twenty-five years earlier. Young Oxford (now 25 and with a beard) is making love to someone. We can't tell who at first, and assume it is Elizabeth. And then we see, it's BESSIE, Young Elizabeth's lady-in-waiting.

DISSOLVE TO:

84 INT. CECIL HOUSE - YOUNG OXFORD'S BEDROOM - NIGHT 84

An hour later, post-coital. A fire is burning, and Bessie is finishing dressing herself.

BESSIE  
Edward... You know she would be  
furious if she found out about this...

Young Oxford doesn't answer. He is deep in thought.

BESSIE (CONT'D)  
She still loves you.

YOUNG OXFORD  
No. She abandoned me.

BESSIE  
You don't know, do you?

He looks at her quizzically.

BESSIE (CONT'D)  
The Queen. She had your child.

85 EXT. CECIL HOUSE - EARLY MORNING 85

A carriage drives towards the house.

85A INT. CARRIAGE - EARLY MORNING 85A

Young Anne de Vere holds her sleeping daughter in her arms.

86 INT. CECIL HOUSE - HALLWAY - EARLY MORNING 86

Bessie carefully closes Oxford's bedroom door and suddenly freezes.

She turns and sees Young Oxford's wife with her little daughter at her side standing in the hallway staring at her.

For a moment nobody dares to move, then Bessie rushes off...

WILLIAM CECIL  
I cannot be certain, majesty, when  
the... relationship began.

CUT TO:

87 INT. RICHMOND PALACE - GREAT HALL - DAY 87

Young Elizabeth looks out a window, obviously distressed. William Cecil is across from her, his face tense.

WILLIAM CECIL  
But sometime soon after your return to  
Court.

YOUNG ELIZABETH  
You're sure?

WILLIAM CECIL  
They-- they haven't been very  
discreet, majesty. I presume he  
wanted you to know. To... to hurt  
you.

She is crushed.

WILLIAM CECIL (CONT'D)  
Majesty, there is more. The lady is  
pregnant.

Young Elizabeth freezes, stunned. Then--

YOUNG ELIZABETH  
Arrest them. Arrest them both!

William Cecil bows and exits.

Now alone, Young Elizabeth lets her emotions out. She  
picks up a vase and THROWS it into a wall.

87A EXT. TOWER OF LONDON - DAY

87A

From high above, we see a carriage arrive. It stops,  
and William Cecil gets out.

88 INT. TOWER OF LONDON - YOUNG OXFORD'S CELL - DAY

88

Young Oxford (now 26) is looking out a window at the  
river beyond. He has been imprisoned for some months.  
His beard has become ragged, his clothes have seen  
better days.

William Cecil enters.

WILLIAM CECIL  
Your whore gave birth last week.

Young Oxford turns to William Cecil. The stare at each  
other for a beat.

WILLIAM CECIL (CONT'D)

The Queen has decided to release you.  
It seems time does indeed heal all  
wounds.

(beat)

These are her conditions for your  
release. One. You will not  
acknowledge the child. Two. You will  
never see the mother again. Three.  
You will avoid Court at all costs.  
Her majesty would prefer not to be  
reminded of you in any way ever again.

A beat as Young Oxford thinks on all this.

YOUNG OXFORD

Banished...?

WILLIAM CECIL

No. You have the freedom of the  
kingdom. Just not of the Court.

(beat)

Those are her terms. Here are mine.  
You will go back to my daughter. You  
will make some effort to make her  
happy and you will finally act  
according to your station in life, and  
accept the responsibilities of your  
great title.

Oxford reluctantly NODS. William Cecil goes to leave.

YOUNG OXFORD

My lord! I, too, have a condition.

William Cecil turns.

YOUNG OXFORD (CONT'D)

I will go back to your daughter if...  
You tell me the name of the child.

WILLIAM CECIL

I don't know if the whore has even  
delivered the--

YOUNG OXFORD

No. The other one.

Cecil's face goes to stone.

WILLIAM CECIL

The other one?

(realizing)

Who told you?

Cecil is obviously annoyed by this development.

YOUNG OXFORD  
I will go back to your daughter. I  
will make you as many grandchildren as  
she can bare...

William Cecil thinks.

YOUNG OXFORD (CONT'D)  
Or I can remain here...

William Cecil decides.

WILLIAM CECIL  
There is no record of his true birth,  
no trail that leads to you, or the...  
mother. His foster parents never knew  
the truth, and both are now dead...

YOUNG OXFORD  
The name?

WILLIAM CECIL  
Make even a hint of this to the child,  
or anyone else, and this agreement is  
void, and I'll see your head on the  
block within a fortnight. And the  
boy's as well.

YOUNG OXFORD  
(excited)  
It's a boy...?

89 EXT. CECIL HOUSE - GARDEN - DAY

89

Young Oxford (cleaned up) is watching a BOY about five  
years old dueling with a tutor. The boy is quite good.

The boy notices Young Oxford, and stops duelling.

BOY  
Hello...

YOUNG OXFORD  
Hello.

Young Oxford smiles at the boy.

YOUNG OXFORD (CONT'D)  
I'm Edward, the Earl of Oxford.

BOY

My lord...

The Boy bows, a serious expression on his face.

YOUNG OXFORD

They tell me one day you're to be an Earl as well.

BOY

I shall be the Earl of Southampton.

YOUNG OXFORD

(smiling)

Well then, we shall be Earls together, shan't we?

CUT TO:

90

INT. WESTMINSTER ABBEY - DAY

90

Twenty-five years later. William Cecil's body is in state, in his coffin, in the center of the apse.

ELIZABETH

looking completely stricken, approaches the coffin, holding Cecil's white cane. She places it at his side.

In the background we hear the Archbishop of Canterbury reading from the bible.

ARCHBISHOP (O.S.)

... In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return to the earth: for out of it wast thou taken, because thou art dust, and to dust shalt thou return...

ROBERT CECIL

scans the room, to see how it is all playing out.

OXFORD

watches stoically, his wife and children at his side.

91 EXT. WESTMINSTER ABBEY - DAY

91

The funeral over, Elizabeth exits the portal of Westminster Abbey and heads to her carriage. A huge crowd of mourners has assembled.

Robert Cecil steps into place right behind her.

ELIZABETH

We wish to recall Essex from  
Ireland...

Robert Cecil is instantly concerned, but hides it well. They continue to walk.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

We feel a terrible void, now that your  
father is no longer at our side...

Robert Cecil bows his head as he walks.

ROBERT CECIL

A wise decision, your majesty. If  
nothing else, it will give him an  
opportunity to respond to all these  
rumors.

Still walking, she turns to him sharply.

ELIZABETH

Rumors?

ROBERT CECIL

I'm sorry, majesty, I thought you'd  
heard.

ELIZABETH

Heard what?

ROBERT CECIL

Essex is in negotiations with Philip  
of Spain...

ELIZABETH

Peace is at hand. We know this.

ROBERT CECIL

Majesty-- it is said that Essex has  
promised Phillip all of Catholic  
Ireland in return for...

He hesitates.

95

ELIZABETH

In return for what?

ROBERT CECIL

Spain's support of Essex's claim to  
the throne of England...

They have arrived at her carriage.

ROBERT CECIL (CONT'D)

(beat)

It is, as of yet, just rumor.

ELIZABETH

Bring him to me, William. Bring him  
to me at once!

ROBERT CECIL

(correcting)

Robert, majesty.

Elizabeth stares at him for an instant, then gets into  
her carriage, unsure of herself.

ROBERT CECIL (CONT'D)

My father's death has been a great  
loss for us all...

She ignores him, trying to collect herself. Robert  
Cecil turns to the driver, NODS, and the carriage takes  
off.

As soon as it is away, Robert Cecil turns and some in  
the crowd of commoners begin to BOO at him.

CUT TO:

HORSE HOOVES

as they gallop over emerald green grasses. We are:

92 EXT. A MILITARY FIELD IN IRELAND - DAY 92

A group of horsemen gallop into Essex's camp. A  
MESSENGER jumps off his horse and heads for Essex's  
tent.

93 INT. ESSEX'S TENT - DAY 93

Where Essex and Southampton are having dinner as the  
messenger enters. He bows.

MESSENGER

My lord...

He hands him a sealed envelope. Essex takes it, begins to read. Frowns, SLAMS the parchment down. He looks into the distance, trying to process what he's just read.

Southampton picks up the parchment and begins reading.

SOUTHAMPTON

She can't believe this...

ESSEX

Oh, can't she?

SOUTHAMPTON

It's Robert Cecil. He failed to kill you, now he tries to kill your name.

Essex heads for the flap of the tent.

ESSEX

We leave with the tide!

CUT TO:

94

INT. THE MERMAID'S TAVERN - NIGHT

94

Shakespeare enters the tavern carrying a rolled up parchment. He passes various actors drinking, then hurries over to Jonson, Nashe and Dekker, who are deep in drink.

SHAKESPEARE

Well, I've got it!

Shakespeare unravels the parchment. He puts it on the table with a flourish.

It shows a coat-of-arms containing a spear and a falcon. The colors are numerous, and garish.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

The herald just finished it not an hour ago.

(smiles)

Well?

Everyone is confused by it.

NASHE

It's quite... colorful.

97

DEKKER

What in blazes is it?

SHAKESPEARE

My coat-of-arms! It cost a bloody fortune, but, by god, you can call me gentleman now!

Jonson looks over at Shakespeare. Shakespeare locks eyes with him, but looks away, ashamed of something.

DEKKER

I can't quite make out the motto...  
Non sanz... Non...

SHAKESPEARE

"Non sanz droict".

NASHE

Not without--

JONSON

Right!? Not without *right*?

(beat)

You went to him, didn't you? You lying knave-- you went to him!

Shakespeare doesn't want to discuss this with the others present.

SHAKESPEARE

(smiles)

Ben. Ben! Let me buy you a--

He grabs Jonson's shoulder, but Jonson pushes him away.

JONSON

What? You've already killed off one competitor. Now you want another dead as well?

Shakespeare looks at the confused Nashe and Dekker nervously.

SHAKESPEARE

I don't know what you mean. Ben, we should really--

JONSON

I swore to him I wouldn't tell you his name. Swore it! Do you have any idea what he might do to me? Do you?

(to Nashe)

(MORE)

JONSON (CONT'D)

He's not even a writer you know. He can't even--

SHAKESPEARE

Ben-- you've had too much to drink.

Shakespeare grabs Jonson.

JONSON

Unhand me!

Shakespeare backs off. Jonson pulls out a piece of parchment from his shirt.

JONSON (CONT'D)

Here!

(looks around)

A quill! A quill!

Nashe and Dekker look at each other, slightly embarrassed. Jonson finds a quill deep in his pants. He thrusts it at Will, who ignores it.

JONSON (CONT'D)

(re: the parchment)

Go on, Will. Write something for us. Now. Go on! Amaze us with your verse. Your wit! No? Try astounding us with the letter "E". Or an "I"-- it's just a straight line!

Shakespeare stares at him.

SHAKESPEARE

You haven't got any ink.

And he exits.

CUT TO:

95 EXT. THE CITY GATES OF LONDON - DAY 95

Southampton and Essex are on horseback, followed by several dozen armed retainers, GALLOPING towards the city of London.

96 EXT. WHITEHALL PALACE - COURTYARD - DAY 96

The party rides into the first gate. The palace is the city residence of the Queen, and is at the edge of the City.

Essex and Southampton jump off their horses.

97 INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - HALLWAY - DAY 97

Essex and Southampton walk quickly down the long hallway, opening door after door. Servants scurry behind them, terrified of the intrusion, trying to stop them. They open the doors into--

98 INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - AUDIENCE CHAMBER - DAY 98

The ladies-in-waiting scream in fear when they see the two men in battle gear.

ESSEX  
(to Southampton)  
Wait for me.

And he continues on into--

99 INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - OLD ELIZABETH'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS 99

--where Elizabeth is still dressing, putting on make-up, etc. She is NOT wearing her wig, and is only wearing her undergarments. She looks quite ugly.

She turns to see Essex, shocked at his intrusion.

Essex FREEZES. He knows he has just made an enormous faux-pas.

ESSEX  
Majesty, I, I...

She stares at him, horrified to be seen in such a manner. The she regains her composure and--

ELIZABETH  
Get out! Out!!!

He steps back in horror-- not at her appearance, but what he has just done. The doors SLAM in front of him as we--

ELIZABETH (O.S.)  
(CONT'D)  
The insolence!

100

INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - AUDIENCE CHAMBER - DAY

100

Elizabeth, now dressed and wearing her wig on her throne, is raging at Robert Cecil.

ELIZABETH

Who in God's name does he think he is?  
Abandoning his post without my leave!

She begins to absent-mindedly unbutton the top of her bodice.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

Coming into our presence in such a manner, neither announced nor invited, half his army in my courtyard. He's gone mad... mad!

ROBERT CECIL

No. Unfortunately for us, your majesty, he is quite sane. He simply believes he is your royal equal.

She turns to him sharply, furious at the thought.

101

EXT. ESSEX HOUSE - DAY

101

It looks like an armed camp, with part of Essex's army encamped in the front courtyard. The soldiers are all tense.

Oxford, followed only by Francesco, rides into the courtyard. He is immediately surrounded by armed men, their muskets pointed at him. Oxford raises his hands.

OXFORD

I am Edward, Earl of Oxford.

SOUTHAMPTON

Edward! Edward! Thank god you're here.

Southampton comes towards him.

SOUTHAMPTON (CONT'D)

Elizabeth has revoked all of his royal licenses! She believes every lie Cecil tells about him.

(seeing Oxford's wound)

Edward? What happened to your leg?

101

OXFORD  
(shrugs)  
Nothing.

Oxford continues towards the door. Southampton follows, his concern for Oxford's wound noticeable.

102

INT. ESSEX HOUSE - HALL - DAY

102

Oxford, Southampton and Essex are alone. Oxford is sitting in a chair, while Essex paces impatiently, Southampton standing between them.

ESSEX  
She won't accept my letters. I cannot get to her. Cecil plans to arrest me any day. I know it.  
(beat and more determined)  
But that won't be as easy as he thinks.

OXFORD  
Fight him in London, and you only validate every rumor and lie Cecil has ever told about you.

ESSEX  
Then what do you suggest I do? Let myself be arrested so I can be tried and executed for crimes I did not commit?

OXFORD  
No. I will go to Elizabeth, myself, alone--

ESSEX  
How? Cecil won't let her see a letter without reading it first.

OXFORD  
I won't send her a letter. I will send her a book.

Essex looks confused, but Oxford ignores it.

OXFORD (CONT'D)  
She will call for me. And while I am with her, you will come-- not with an army, not with swords, but with her loyal subjects. The cobblers, the tinkers, the bricklayers of London.  
(MORE)

102

OXFORD (CONT'D)

All, all calling for Robert Cecil's  
banishment from Court. Words, Robert,  
words, will prevail with her, not  
swords.

Essex looks unsure.

ESSEX

And the mob? How will I--

OXFORD

Leave that to me.

103 OMIT 103

103A INT. OXFORD STONE - A STUDY - NIGHT 103A

Oxford is in his rooms, writing feverishly by  
candlelight.

He completes a thought... closes the manuscript...  
writes down the title with a flourish:

The Tragedie of Richard III

104 INT. A ROOM ABOVE THE MERMAID'S TAVERN - DAY 104

A room for the whores to take their tricks. Small,  
with nothing much beyond a straw bed.

Shakespeare is bedding a buxom young lady.

And then the door OPENS. Francesco enters, and Oxford  
follows, holding a manuscript. Shakespeare looks  
shocked. She starts to SCREAM and yell as she pulls a  
sheet to cover herself.

FRANCESCO

(to the whore)

Hold your tongue, whore, and get out!

She does so as Oxford walks over to Shakespeare. He  
tosses the manuscript to him. Shakespeare starts to  
look at it. The whore is partially dressed, so--

FRANCESCO (CONT'D)

(to the whore)

Out, woman!

WHORE

Oi. 'Oo's going to pay me then?

103

Shakespeare gives a look to Oxford-- he certainly isn't going to pay for it.

Oxford nods to Francesco, who gives the whore a few coins. She smiles, and leaves.

OXFORD

You shall begin rehearsals immediately. But it is not to be performed until I tell you. And you may only have a day's notice.

Shakespeare looks confused.

SHAKESPEARE

That will be expensive-- keeping all the actors ready. Having the props made but not--

Oxford tosses a very large pouch of coins at him, and then begins to leave.

OXFORD

Oh, and congratulations. You've had an epic poem published today.

SHAKESPEARE

(confused)

Published? You mean like in a book?

Renaissance MUSIC BEGINS as we--

CUT TO:

A PIECE OF PAPER

as a printer presses down the press onto it. The title page is printed in front of us. It's called "Venus and Adonis". A MONTAGE BEGINS.

105

INT. A PRINT SHOP - DAY

105

And the printer brings the page out from the press and checks it for proper alignment.

SHAKESPEARE (V.O.)

'The boar!' quoth she; whereat a sudden pale,  
Like lawn being spread upon the blushing rose...  
Usurps her cheek; she trembles at his tale,

(MORE)

104

SHAKESPEARE (V.O.)  
And on his neck her yoking arms she  
throws:

The printer nods his approval... The poem continues  
with:

105A EXT. THE PRINT SHOP - DAY 105A

Shakespeare exits the Print Shop, continuing to read  
the book, now out-loud.

SHAKESPEARE (V.O.)  
She sinketh down, still hanging by his  
neck,  
He on her belly falls, she on her  
back.  
(not quoting)  
Oh, I like this...

DISSOLVE TO:

106 OMIT 106

A COVER OF "VENUS AND ADONIS"

that is held by a woman.

LADY IN WAITING (O.S.)  
'Fondling,' she saith,  
I'll be a park, and thou shalt be my  
deer;  
Feed where thou wilt, on mountain or  
in dale:

We are:

107 INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - AUDIENCE CHAMBER - DAY 107

A LADY-IN-WAITING is reading out loud to other Ladies.  
They listen giggling now and then. We only see them  
from the back.

LADY IN WAITING  
Graze on my lips; and if those hills  
be dry,  
Stray lower, where the pleasant  
fountains lie.

SECOND LADY IN WAITING  
(continuing)  
Seeds spring from seeds, and beauty  
breedeth beauty;  
Thou wast begot; to beget is thy duty.  
By law of nature thou art bound to  
breed...

They look up and see--

ELIZABETH

standing across the room. How much has she heard?

WIDER

They all stand abruptly, worried. The woman who was  
reading the book puts it down on a table.

Elizabeth silently walks over to them, and picks up the  
book. She opens it as we--

CUT TO:

108 INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - HALLWAY - DUSK 108

Robert Cecil walks down the long hall, heading for an  
audience with the queen. Two guards open a door,  
letting him into--

109 INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - OLD ELIZABETH'S BEDROOM - DUSK 109

Elizabeth is looking out the window. It's raining  
outside. She is NOT wearing her wig, not much make-up,  
and looks quite... odd.

Robert Cecil enters.

ELIZABETH  
(turns)  
You find me disgusting, don't you?  
Repugnant. Wrinkled?

ROBERT CECIL  
You, you are the sun, majesty. The  
glory of--

ELIZABETH  
Liar!

Robert Cecil shuts his mouth.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

Is it so hard to believe that once I  
was young? That I was... beautiful?  
Your father knew me as such...

(beat)

You have read the book?

She doesn't have to say which one. Robert Cecil sees a  
copy of "Venus and Adonis" on a table. He NODS.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

He writes to me. To remind me of that  
beauty. That love. How I... took  
him. How I... adored him...

Robert Cecil knows to be silent. She looks out the  
window.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

(throaty, sexually)

Graze on my lips; and if those hills  
be dry,  
Stray lower, where the pleasant  
fountains lie...

She smiles seductively, transported in time.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

I've been foolish. Proud. Yes. Too  
proud. Gloriana... The Virgin  
Queen... A statue. Bloodless.

(beat)

"Thou wast begot; to beget is thy  
duty.

By law of nature thou art bound to  
breed, That thine may live when thou  
thyself art dead"...

(beat)

Your father told you of the child?

A beat.

ROBERT CECIL

(hint of a smile)

Which one, your majesty?

Elizabeth's eyes flare in anger for an instant, then  
she regains composure.

ELIZABETH

His. Mine. He still lives?

Robert Cecil nods.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)  
He was well placed? A nobleman?

ROBERT CECIL  
(hesitates)  
Yes... your majesty.

ELIZABETH  
Who?

Robert Cecil hesitates.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)  
I am your Queen! Now who is my son!!?

ROBERT CECIL  
His grace, the Earl of... Southampton,  
your majesty.

She seems surprised. Perhaps she was expecting Essex.  
But then she smiles, and NODS in approval.

CECIL  
Majesty... You are not having doubts  
about James of Scotland succeeding  
you, are you?

Elizabeth goes into a rage.

ELIZABETH  
James?! He is the son of Mary! She  
plotted and schemed to steal the  
throne from under me! No son of hers  
will rule while a yet Tudor lives!

Robert Cecil is surprised by her fury. He bows his  
head as Elizabeth tries to collect herself.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)  
I will decide what is best for my  
kingdom! Not you! Not you!!  
(calmer)  
I have bid Edward to come to me on my  
return to London on Monday next. It  
is decided.

She says no more, the audience over. Robert Cecil  
hesitates, and then she glares at him... He bows and  
exits, the fury on his face plain.

Elizabeth looks at her own reflection in the window...

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

(sotto)

And so, in spite of death, I shall  
survive,  
In that, my likeness still is left  
alive.

CUT TO:

110 EXT. BANKSIDE LONDON - DAY 110

Ben Jonson walks with a manuscript in his hands. He stops for a moment when he sees the new Globe theater. Workers are still painting the walls.

He pauses when he sees a poster in front advertising a performance of "Richard III" on Monday next.

110A INT. THE GLOBE THEATER - DAY 110A

Jonson sticks his head in and takes in the glorious new theater Shakespeare and Burbage have built.

The actor Condell is on stage, rehearsing the character of "Gloucester". He walks on stage with a limp, and has a large hump on his back. He is a caricature of Robert Cecil.

"GLOUCESTER"

(in character)

But I, that am not shaped for sportive  
tricks, nor made to court an amorous  
looking-glass...

Richard BURBAGE, the theater's stage manager, is watching his performance with Spencer and a group of actors.

Jonson stops and watches the rehearsal for a beat.

"GLOUCESTER" (CONT'D)

(in character)

I, that am curtail'd of this fair  
proportion, deformed, unfinish'd, sent  
before my time into this breathing  
world...

SPENCER

Good part, that...

"GLOUCESTER"

...and that so lamely and  
unfashionable that dogs bark at me as  
I halt by them.

(out of character)

Is this wise?

BURBAGE

It's only the one performance. Go on!

"GLOUCESTER"

I need a drink...

And "Gloucester" heads backstage.

JONSON

(to Burbage)

Burbage. Wonderful theater. Wonderful!  
The best Bankside! But only one  
performance? Is it that bad?

BURBAGE

Hardly, it's Will's new play. Richard  
the Third. We've been hired to  
perform it free to the public.

JONSON

Free?

BURBAGE

Aye. Some anonymous nobleman paid for  
everything. God knows Will never  
would. Been rehearsing all week,  
just found out this morning, we go up  
next Monday.

Jonson thinks a beat-- that's odd-- but then holds up  
his manuscript.

JONSON

(grins)

My best so far. I guarantee more than  
one performance. Though I'll not pay  
for the tickets myself.

(winks)

No need to.

BURBAGE

Sorry, Ben...

Jonson looks confused.

BURBAGE (CONT'D)

Will... He's part owner... I'm sorry Ben, but I had to agree no Jonson plays at the Globe... Ever.

Jonson is in shock.

CUT TO:

111 INT. THE MERMAID'S TAVERN - NIGHT

111

Jonson is deep in drink, by himself. He listens as patrons of the bar say:

MAN

(to a woman)  
You doin' tomorrow?

WOMAN

You askin?

MAN

Managed to get two tickets to Shakespeare's latest. Cost me a fortune.

PASSING MAN

Ballocks, did it! They're giving them away free.

Some of the actors from the rehearsal enter, all jolly and excited. They head for the bar. They are: The ACTOR WHO PLAYED "GLOUCESTER", Spencer, Pope, Heminge, etc...

SPENCER

Best villain in the history of theater, Richard the Third. No doubt.

HEMINGE

Come on. Better than Mephistopheles?

SPENCER

No doubt! Your Marlowe-- god rest his soul-- is fine for your everyday scalawag, and your Jonson won't even try the hard drama. No, this is Shakespeare, for god's sake! The man knows drama. I tell you, not even the Greeks compare!

(toasting)

To Shakespeare! And villainy!

111

ALL  
To Shakespeare! And villainy!

Jonson gets up, furious, and exits, quite drunk. The actors don't even notice him.

112 EXT. STREET IN FRONT OF TOWER OF LONDON - NIGHT 112

Jonson stumbles down the streets, alone, deep in his own private hell. It's raining.

WHORE  
Fancy a tumble? Only sixpence!

Jonson waves her off. He looks up and sees:

FROM HIS POV:

The Tower of London. He makes a decision.

113 OMITTED 113

114 INT. THE TOWER OF LONDON - POLE'S ROOM - DAY 114

Jonson sits in the same spot where Marlowe was sitting earlier. And he hates himself for it. Rain drips down the windows.

Pole looks up from some papers.

POLE  
I haven't got all day, man.

JONSON  
I... There is a-- there is a play to be performed... on Monday.

POLE  
There's many plays to be performed next Monday, isn't there?

JONSON  
Yes, my lord, but this one is to be performed one performance, and one performance only. On Monday. All Bankside is talking of it.  
(beat)  
The History of King Richard the Third.  
By William Shakespeare.

Pole is confused. So?

112

JONSON (CONT'D)

He kills his brother the king, and  
half the royal family to get the  
throne for himself--

POLE

I know who Richard the Third was.

JONSON

Yes. Of course you do. But in  
William Shakespeare's version, he is  
played as a hunch-back.

Pole realizes this is significant.

115 INT. CECIL HOUSE - THE PRIVATE CHAPEL - DAWN 115

Robert Cecil has prayed all night. His lips silently  
move in a prayer for a miracle.

When Pole appears he doesn't stop his prayer. Only  
after Pole whispers in his ear does he stop and look  
slowly up to the simple cross and close his eyes in  
relief.

116 EXT. LONDON - DAY 116

From high, high above a city of 200,000 souls. It's a  
beautiful sunny day, but black storm clouds are on the  
horizon.

All of London is on its feet. They all are on their way  
to Bankside.

The London Bridge is crammed one way. The River Thames  
is full of many small boats of theatergoers.

117 EXT. BANKSIDE - IN FRONT OF THE GLOBE - DAY 117

We see that a huge crowd has formed in front of the  
Globe.

118 INT. THE GLOBE THEATER - BACKSTAGE - DAY 118

Everyone is busy, preparing for the performance;  
actors, stage-hands, etc...

Shakespeare adjusts an actor's costume when Burbage  
walks up besides him.

BURBAGE

We have to turn 'em away by the  
hundreds! Look! Never seen anything  
quite like it!

And both men look out the curtains to the crowd  
outside.

The theater is full to the last seat. The people are  
crammed together like sardines.

118A INT. OXFORD STONE - OXFORD'S ROOM - NIGHT 118A

Oxford is being dressed in front of a mirror... His  
finest clothes... Powder to face...

Francesco assists him.

118AA INT. THE GLOBE THEATER - THE GALLERIES - DAY 118AA

Jonson is leaning against the edge of the balustrade,  
watching the Groundlings fill in. He bites his nails  
nervous.

Nashe joins him as--

NASHE

So! I heard the Earl of Essex paid for  
this whole performance! Man's never even  
been to the theater, and still he's heard  
of Will--

Dekker also joins them.

DEKKER

Essex!? Impossible. My cousin's one of  
his men-at-arms. Hasn't been paid in  
weeks. They're all just sitting there,  
waiting.

JONSON

Waiting? Waiting for what?

DEKKER

Wants to have an audience with the Queen.  
As if Cecil would ever let Essex near her  
now.

NASHE

By the mass, Cecil in favor, Essex out!  
Who can keep up with it all!?

(takes a swig)

(MORE)

NASHE (CONT'D)

Zounds, I tire of politics, politics,  
politics.

119 EXT. THE THAMES RIVER - DAY 119

Oxford is in a long-boat, headed for Whitehall Palace. The oars of the boat cut neatly and silently into the water.

120 INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - OLD ELIZABETH'S BEDROOM - DAY 120

Elizabeth is doing her toilette. She seems excited like a school girl before her first date. Her Ladies in waiting are attending to her.

121 INT. THE GLOBE THEATER - DAY 121

The audience HUSHES as--

ON STAGE

"GLOUCESTER", the future Richard III, enters. He is hunch-backed, and looks as much like Robert Cecil as possible in terms of beard and costume. First the people are in stunned silence, but then like magic the hissing starts. It is followed by more hissing and the first boos.

The actor playing Gloucester nervously looks around...

IN THE GALLERIES

Dekker seems surprised at the similarity to Robert Cecil.

DEKKER

(to Nashe)

Tired of politics are you? Seems you  
picked the wrong day to come to the  
theater, then...

Jonson gives Dekker a sharp look. *What's going on here?*

ON STAGE

"Gloucester" addresses the audience.

"GLOUCESTER"

Now is the winter of our discontent  
made glorious summer by this son of  
York. Grim-visaged war hath smooth'd  
his wrinkled front....

The hissing and booing has swelled so strong that the actor stops for a moment. But then he finds the courage again to continue.

Jonson looks down at the Groundling's reaction, and spots--

FRANCESCO

in the audience. But among the Groundlings, not in Oxford's usual box seat.

JONSON

looks over to Oxford's box. It's empty.

"GLOUCESTER"

...and now instead of mounting barded steeds to fright the souls of fearful adversaries, he capers nimbly in a lady's chamber to the lascivious pleasing of a lute. But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks, nor made to court an amorous looking-glass...

122 OMIT 122

123 INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - ROBERT CECIL'S ROOM - DAY 123

Robert Cecil watches himself in a mirror as armor is placed on him by servants.

"GLOUCESTER" (O.S.)

I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion, deformed, unfinish'd, sent before my time into this breathing world,....

124 EXT. BANKSIDE - IN FRONT OF THE GLOBE THEATER - DAY 124

The huge crowd has stayed in front of the Globe. It seems they are waiting for something. We hear hissing and booing from the crowd inside the theater.

"GLOUCESTER"

...and that so lamely and unfashionable that dogs bark at me as I halt by them.

125 INT. THE GLOBE THEATER - DAY 125

On stage, "Gloucester: continues despite the concert of hissing and booing...

"GLOUCESTER"

And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover, I am determined to prove a villain and hate the idle pleasures of these days...

126 EXT. ESSEX HOUSE - DAY 126

Essex mounts his horse, Southampton at his side. Their sixty or so men behind them ready for the march to Elizabeth.

ESSEX

Edward knows what he is doing... Does he not?

SOUTHAMPTON

He promised us a mob. They'll be here.

Essex looks concerned, but says no more.

127 INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - ROBERT CECIL'S ROOM - DAY 127

The servant tightens the last strap of Robert Cecil's armor. He smiles at himself in the mirror.

"GLOUCESTER" (O.S.)

Plots have I laid!

CANNONS DRAWN BY HORSES

as they roll down a cobbled street. We are:

128 EXT. LONDON BRIDGE - DAY 128

Soldiers move people and carts off the street. Others put CANNONS into place and then cover them with canvas tarps.

"GLOUCESTER" (O.S.)

Inductions dangerous, by drunken prophecies, libels and dreams, to set my brother Clarence and the king in deadly hate the one against the other.

129

INT. THE GLOBE THEATER - DAY

129

Shakespeare watches from backstage, getting more and more nervous by the audience's reaction.

AN AUDIENCE MEMBER  
(to the actor playing  
"Gloucester")

A pox on you!

FRANCESCO  
A pox on Cecil!

MORE AUDIENCE MEMBERS  
A pox on Cecil! A pox on Cecil!

The actors are getting nervous. People start throwing lettuce and tomatoes at them.

NASHE  
Why is Oxford's man with the Groundlings?

BACKSTAGE

Shakespeare and Burbage exchange a worried glance.

130

EXT. ESSEX HOUSE - DAY

130

The BELLS of St. James' Cathedral mark the hour as five o'clock. Essex looks to Southampton nervously.

131

INT. THE GLOBE THEATER - DAY

131

The play continues. "Gloucester" is plotting yet another death on his way to the throne.

"GLOUCESTER"  
Hath she forgot already that brave  
prince,  
Edward, her lord, whom I, some three  
months since,  
Stabb'd in my angry mood at Tewksbury?  
A sweeter and a lovelier gentleman-  
Fram'd in the prodigality of  
nature, Young, valiant, wise, and  
no doubt right royal-

FRANCESCO  
Down with Cecil!

The actor playing "Gloucester" hesitates. The audience is getting unruly.

118

FRANCESCO (CONT'D)  
Up with Essex! To Essex House! To  
Essex House!!

IN THE GALLERIES

Jonson is putting the pieces together. He stands.

JONSON  
This is what Essex is waiting for--  
(realizing)  
Oxford is bringing him a mob.

Jonson heads for the stairs.

NASHE  
Why would Oxford--

JONSON  
I don't know, I don't know! But, the  
Tower-- Cecil, he already knows. He  
knows!  
(looks at Francesco)  
I-- I have to warn them!

Nashe and Dekker are baffled as Jonson rushes down the stairs.

VARIOUS GROUNDINGS  
Up with Essex! Essex! Death to  
Cecil!

BACKSTAGE

Shakespeare turns to Burbage.

SHAKESPEARE  
We must close the play. Now!!

BURBAGE  
Close the...? Are you off your head?

We can start to HEAR the audience chanting "Ess-ex, Ess-ex"...

ON STAGE

It's getting unruly.

"GLOUCESTER"  
(repeating)  
Fram'd... in the prodigality of  
nature, Young, valiant, wise, and no  
doubt right royal-

"Ess-ex, Ess-ex, Ess-ex"

ON THE GROUND

Jonson pushes his way through the crowd, trying to head for Francesco. But they're separated by a sea of people.

FRANCESCO  
To Essex House! To Essex House!  
Death to Cecil! Traitor!

A moment as the whole audience thinks on this. And then these chants are repeated by hundreds in the audience as they are pushing towards exits.

And Jonson-- still struggling to reach Francesco-- is carried along with the mob.

132 EXT. OUTSIDE THE GLOBE THEATER - DAY 132

The mob pours out of the doors.

Storm clouds are gathering. A RUMBLE of thunder sounds in the distance.

133 INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - HALLWAY - DAY 133

Oxford is waiting for his audience, looking out a window, nervously.

134 EXT. BANKSIDE LONDON - DAY 134

The crowd pours through Bankside, growing in numbers as more people come out of taverns, whore-houses, etc...

A shop-owner comes out of his store, confused. Another MAN grabs him.

MAN  
To Essex! And then to the Queen!  
(joins in the chanting)  
Ess-ex! Ess-ex!

The shop-owner begins to get the spirit of the mob.

135 EXT. LONDON BRIDGE - DAY 135

If anything, the crowd is twice the size it was moments ago. They head down the shop-lined bridge, full of bravado.

JONSON

is in the middle of the uncontrolled mob. He spots Francesco nearby.

WIDER

The mob has to slow down on the bridge. There is not much room. And then it happens!

We are at the front of the mob, when the first soldiers appear and pull down the tarps revealing the cannons.

People scream as an Officer appears and--

OFFICER

Fire!

And then the cannon FIRES. There is PANIC all around, and-

JONSON

runs with the crowd, trying to escape.

137 EXT. ESSEX HOUSE - DAY

137

Essex and Southampton look tense. They expected a mob here by now.

SOUTHAMPTON

They should be here by now...

Essex frowns.

ESSEX

We go as we are! Now!!

And he spurs his horse, and GALLOPS down the street.

ESSEX (CONT'D)

To the Queen!

Southampton has no choice, and follows. So do the 60 or so men behind them.

136 INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - HALLWAY - DAY

136

Oxford hears a cannon shot. But it could also be the sound of thunder. He goes to the window, sees the rain clouds, and dismisses the sound. A LADY IN WAITING enters.

LADY-IN-WAITING

My lord. Her majesty will be with you shortly.

138 Omitted 138

139 EXT. LONDON BRIDGE - DAY 139

The mob is in panic. And--

JONSON

is in the middle of it.

FRANCESCO

Signor Jonson! We are betrayed! Run!  
Run!

Jonson looks on in horror as Francesco is KILLED by a soldier wielding a pike.

140 EXT. WHITEHALL PALACE - COURTYARD - DAY 140

Essex and his men ROAR past the token guards at the front gate, and gallop into the--

MAIN COURTYARD

Essex rears his horse, looks around at the many windows that surround them from above.

ESSEX

To the Queen! To the Queen!

His men repeat his plea. And then, once again, another trap springs.

THE GATE

SLAMS closed. And--

GUARDS ARMED WITH MUSKETS

line up in a colonnade in the story above. Pole is in command.

POLE

Take your aim!

SOUTHAMPTON

realizes--

SOUTHAMPTON

It's a trap!

ESSEX

Spread out!

But before his men can obey--

IN THE COLONNADE

Pole orders--

POLE

Fire!!

IN THE COURTYARD

AND a hundred shots FIRE down into Essex and his men!

141 INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - HALLWAY - DAY 141

Oxford HEARS the SHOTS fired. Confused, he goes to a window, looks out and sees:

FROM HIS POV:

Men fall all around Essex and Southampton.

141A EXT. WHITEHALL PALACE - COURTYARD - DAY 141A

Pole walks down the colonnade.

POLE

Re-load!

142 INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - AUDIENCE CHAMBER - DAY 142

Elizabeth heads for the window just as a door behind her SLAMS open, and Robert Cecil hurries in with a dozen guards.

ROBERT CECIL

Majesty! You must away! Essex is in armed revolt! He's come to usurp you!

ELIZABETH

(confused)

Essex? I-- Edward is--

She seems like a confused old woman.

ROBERT CECIL

You must flee! Quickly! Majesty! He means to kill you and take your throne for himself!

It takes only an instant for that to sink in. She looks enraged. And then she turns with a flurry, and heads back the way she came. The guards that were with Robert Cecil follow her.

143 EXT. WHITEHALL PALACE - COURTYARD - DAY 143

Another fusillade is SHOT, and more of Essex's men go down.

And then doors OPEN on the ground floor, and guards RUSH out to take down the survivors.

Essex and Southampton valiantly fight, but there's just too many.

They're soon surrounded... And Essex, knowing all is lost, raises his sword in defeat.

Southampton sees this, and does the same.

144 INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS 144

Oxford watches all of this through the window.

ROBERT CECIL (O.S.)

She won't forgive him this, Edward.

Oxford turns, devastated.

ROBERT CECIL (CONT'D)

Essex will be convicted and executed for treason.

(beat)

As will your son.

Oxford looks shocked.

ROBERT CECIL (CONT'D)

(smiles)

What? Didn't you think I knew? Of course I knew, Edward. My father told me all his secrets. All of them.

(smiling)

Though the most fascinating was not made known to me until after his death.

(MORE)

124

ROBERT CECIL (CONT'D)

He hated you, Edward, how he hated you. And yet he married his only daughter to you. I never knew why, until I read his last letter to me.

OXFORD

He wanted his grandson to be an Earl.

ROBERT CECIL

No, Edward. He wanted his grandson to be a king.

Oxford now looks confused.

ROBERT CECIL (CONT'D)

Elizabeth had several children, Edward, not just yours. She was sixteen for the first. Bloody Mary was still Queen, and our future Gloriana was out of favor. No one thought her very important at all. Except my father, of course. And when her first child was born, a male, my father took it, and hid it. The grandson of Henry VIII, the foundling of course had to be reared a nobleman. John De Vere, the previous Earl of Oxford, agreed to accept the task.

Oxford goes ashen.

OXFORD

You lie...

ROBERT CECIL

Do I?

(beat)

Why do you think he worked so hard to become your guardian after your father died? He had it all planned years in advance. He would teach you everything he knew about statecraft, marry his daughter, and, after Elizabeth's death, proclaim you heir. His own grandchild to follow you on the throne. But he couldn't possibly predict what kind of failure you would become. How you would fail in politics, ignore your estates to the point of bankruptcy, all to write...

(sneers)

Poetry.

(beat)

Or that you would commit incest.

(MORE)

ROBERT CECIL (CONT'D)

(beat)

Delicious isn't it? Right out of a Greek tragedy.

OXFORD

Elizabeth would never have--

ROBERT CECIL

What? Slept with her son?

(beat)

I don't think she ever knew, to tell you the truth. Though you never know with the Tudors. They all have had such strange tastes in bed-fellows.

(beat)

You could have been a king, Edward. And your son after you. Except for the fact that... you were you.

145 EXT. WHITEHALL PALACE - COURTYARD - DAY

145

It's raining, hard.

Oxford almost stumbles out of the building onto the now empty courtyard. The remains of the battle are still visible. Wounded, screaming horses struggle to stand...

Oxford's a shell-- devoid of emotion. Broken. Hardly alive at all. He drops to his knees, the rain pouring down on him.

We see the silhouette of a man watching through a window from the second story above. It's--

145A INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - HALL - SAME TIME

145A

--Robert Cecil, a slight smile on his face.

Pole approaches him from behind. Robert Cecil doesn't turn or acknowledge Pole, but speaks to him as he stares at Oxford.

ROBERT CECIL

I want a fair trial for Southampton... Evidence, witnesses, no false confessions. It must be above reproach. Though with a guilty verdict of course. Oh, and Pole--

(turns)

If there is any mention of that play-- (looks back at Oxford)

(MORE)

126

ROBERT CECIL (CONT'D)  
--Make certain the secretaries refer  
to it as Richard the Second. There  
will be no mention of hunchbacks in  
the official record...

CUT TO:

146 EXT. OXFORD STONE - GARDEN - DAY

146

Oxford is sitting in a chair, watching the river Thames, alone. Snow is falling and Oxford is covered in a thick blanket. He looks ill.

Anne walks up behind him.

ANNE  
Sentence has been passed.

Oxford looks over at her. Anne smiles. This news gives her great pleasure.

ANNE (CONT'D)  
They are to be be-headed.  
(with venom)  
Both of them. Essex tomorrow,  
Southampton in a week.  
(beat)  
Your son is going to be killed,  
Edward. By his own mother. Put that  
in one of your plays!

And she leaves him with that.

147 EXT. THE TOWER OF LONDON - COURTYARD - DAY

147

Essex-- dressed in black, but with a bright red waistcoat-- is led up a scaffold by guards, his hands bound behind him.

Snow covers the courtyard. There are only a few witnesses, as befitting Essex's rank.

ESSEX

stands, looking at life one last time. The Executioner approaches with an axe. Essex turns, realizing it is time.

ESSEX  
Strike true.

He kneels, resting his head on a wooden bench.

127

ESSEX (CONT'D)  
God save the Queen!

And BAM! Just as the axe lands we--

CUT TO:

FROM A WINDOW

we see the body of Essex fall onto the scaffolding, his head into a basket. We are:

148 INT. THE TOWER OF LONDON - A CELL - DAY 148

Southampton, a prisoner, is watching his future fate from a room high in a tower.

DISSOLVE TO:

BOOTS

as they walk, limping along tiled floors. We are:

149 INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - AUDIENCE CHAMBER - DAY 149

Doors fly open and Oxford appears before Elizabeth, who is on her throne, regal and all in white, surrounded by courtiers, including Robert Cecil. But she looks very old, very ill.

Everyone goes silent as Oxford approaches Elizabeth. Oxford makes no notice of them. He bows deeply in front of her.

ELIZABETH  
Leave us. All of you.

People start to exit. But not Robert Cecil.

ROBERT CECIL  
Majesty, I--

ELIZABETH  
Leave us!

Cecil exits, obviously worried. When they are alone:

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)  
You look old...

Oxford smiles sadly.

OXFORD

I thank your majesty for seeing me.

ELIZABETH

You cannot have him.

OXFORD

He is our son.

ELIZABETH

Who did commit High Treason!

OXFORD

They only wished for a place in  
government equal to their station.  
Equal to their birth.

ELIZABETH

You caused this! Your play, your  
words, caused my people to mob against  
me! Do you think I wasn't aware of  
your plot with this man Shakespeare,  
that I wouldn't recognize your voice?  
It should be your head on the block  
next week, not Southampton's!

Oxford kneels.

OXFORD

Then take my head. In our son's  
stead.

Elizabeth turns away from him, angered. She walks to a  
window, turns her back on him.

OXFORD (CONT'D)

Neither they nor I ever conspired  
against you. Cecil alone was our aim.  
He has corrupted your--

ELIZABETH

Cecil? He has kept me my throne!

(beat)

Mary, Queen of Scots... Philip, King  
of Spain... Four French Louis's...  
Eight Popes-- they all wanted my head.  
My throne. All of them!

(beat)

Yet here I remain... Because of the  
Cecils.

OXFORD

We would have protected you--

ELIZABETH

You would have protected me? You? My  
"loyal" Earls?

(snarls)

You think Essex and Southampton were  
the first to conspire against me, to  
try to take my throne? No!

(beat)

Only the Cecils could I trust!  
Commoners! They could never claim my  
throne. Never! Their wealth, their  
power, their survival, all depended on  
me. Me and no other!

A long beat before--

OXFORD

Let our child live...

ELIZABETH

(furious)

All Englishmen are my children!

She has a coughing fit. Oxford patiently waits until  
she has recovered. Finally...

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

Does he know?

Oxford shakes his head.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

And if I give him to you?

OXFORD

He will never learn of it from me.

She pauses for a long moment... And then she decides.

ELIZABETH

He must never know... Never.

(beat)

Take him.

Oxford dares to smile, relieved.

OXFORD

But only after my death! Only then!  
When all is complete. After James is  
crowned king, his crown safe, only  
then can you claim your son... our  
son.

(beat)

This Island will be whole.

(MORE)

OXFORD (CONT'D)

One Island, one kingdom, one King.

(with disgust)

Scotsman though he be.

(beat)

That, that will be my final gift to my people.

(beat)

And I shall remain pure... Un-taken!

Elizabeth again looks out a window.

ELIZABETH

Treason... that is all that has come from you... your son... Your plays... None will be claimed by you. None.

And she leaves the throne chamber. Oxford looks after her as the SOUNDS of BELLS slowly begin GONGING as we--

DISSOLVE TO:

150 EXT. LONDON - DAY 150

The bell-ringing comes from St. Paul's Cathedral, the largest church in the City.

CUT TO:

151 EXT. THE THAMES RIVER - DAY 151

On the frozen river Thames we see the funeral procession for the greatest Queen England has ever seen. Everybody follows the carriage with the casket of the queen.

All the lords and ladies of the land. All wear elaborate black clothing.

First is Robert Cecil. Proudly. Not far walks Oxford.

He is a statue. Devoid of emotion. And then joyous CHORAL MUSIC replaces the CHURCH GONGS as we--

CUT TO:

A GOLD CROWN

as it is placed on a head. We are:

152 INT. WESTMINSTER ABBEY - DAY

152

JAMES I (late 30's) is being crowned by the Archbishop. All the lords and ladies of the land are standing in attendance.

ROBERT CECIL

is watching James. His face betrays his proud feelings. All of Robert Cecil's desires have come true.

Oxford's wife Anne is there, but Oxford is nowhere to be seen.

ARCHBISHOP (O.S.)

God save the King!

EVERYONE IN THE ABBEY

God save the King!

CUT TO:

153 EXT. STREET IN FRONT OF TOWER OF LONDON - DAY

153

It's foggy. Oxford stands next to a carriage, waiting as the gates open, and Southampton-- scruffy and a bit worse for wear-- is escorted out.

Southampton smiles weakly when he sees Oxford waiting for him. The two men walk towards each other and embrace.

Both men have tears in their eyes.

SHAKESPEARE (O.S.)

No, no, no, no.

CUT TO:

154 INT. THE GLOBE THEATER - DAY

154

Shakespeare is on stage, supervising a rehearsal of "Much Ado About Nothing". He doesn't look pleased.

SHAKESPEARE

The line won't get a laugh that way.  
You must accent the word sirrah--

JONSON (O.S.)

Will! Will Shakespeare!

132

Shakespeare turns and sees Jonson heading his way. Jonson is completely drunk, waving a sword in one hand, a tankard in another.

JONSON (CONT'D)

So! Off to the palace are you?

Shakespeare immediately sees Jonson's condition.

SHAKESPEARE

Ben!

JONSON

A command performance for our new king! Even in bloody Scotland they've heard of bloody Will Shakespeare, have they? Fraud. Charlatan. Counterfeiter of wit! Murderer!

The actors on stage are all watching, nervous.

SHAKESPEARE

Ben, please...

But Jonson CHARGES Shakespeare. Shakespeare easily dodges the drunk Jonson. Jonson ROARS and attacks again.

Shakespeare dodges again, turns, and manages to grab Jonson by the throat. They are face to face.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

You came to me, Ben. You came to me!

They stare at each other and then Shakespeare SHOVES him off. Jonson falls to the ground.

CUT TO:

155

EXT. OUTSIDE THE GLOBE THEATER - LATE AFTERNOON

155

Jonson-- only semi conscious-- is carried by the actors and dumped into the street. They leave him there. He wallows in the mud for a beat. Then--

SERVANT (O.C.)

Master Jonson?

Jonson looks up to see one of Oxford's servants standing above him.

156 INT. OXFORD STONE - OUTSIDE OXFORD'S BEDROOM - DUSK 156

The servant guides Jonson towards Oxford's bedroom just as Anne and a DOCTOR emerge from it. She recognizes him.

ANNE  
(to servant)  
What is this man doing in my house?

The servant doesn't know what to say.

ANNE (CONT'D)  
(to Jonson)  
You will leave at once. My husband is quite ill--

JONSON  
It was your husband who sent for me, madam.

ANNE  
And I am dismissing you--

A SECOND DOCTOR exits the sick man's room.

SECOND DOCTOR  
Are you Jonson?

Jonson nods.

SECOND DOCTOR (CONT'D)  
He's asking for you.

JONSON  
Excuse me, your grace.

CUT TO:

157 INT. OXFORD STONE - OXFORD'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS 157

Oxford, in bed, looks quite ill, sweat covering his brow.

He furiously writes on a small tablet on his lap. He holds up his hand for silence as Jonson enters, the doctor following behind him.

OXFORD  
Thank you, doctor.

The doctor exits.

OXFORD (CONT'D)

Come over here, Jonson...

He points to a chair by the bed. When Jonson sits down he notices a big pile of manuscripts by the side of the bed.

OXFORD (CONT'D)

Did you know, Jonson, that my family can trace its peerage farther back than any family in the kingdom? We fought at Crecy. At Bosworth Field. At Agincourt.

(beat)

I inherited my Earldom as one of the wealthiest men ever to breathe English air... and at last breath, I shall be one of the poorest.

Jonson looks on sadly.

OXFORD (CONT'D)

Never a voice in government. Never a sword raised in glorious battle. No immortal deeds for my heirs to know me by.

(beat)

Words, merely words, are to be my legacy...

(beat)

You alone watch my plays and know them as mine. When I hear the applause, the cheering, of the audience, all those hands clapping, they are celebrating... another man. But in that cacophony of sounds, I strained to hear the sound of two hands only. Yours.

(beat)

But heard them, I never did.

Jonson stares at him.

OXFORD (CONT'D)

Death takes away all pretense and demands honesty from its target. You, you have never told me... never told me what you thought of my work...

To answer is not an easy task for Jonson's ego. He hesitates.

JONSON  
(almost a whisper)  
I find... your words... the most  
wondrous ever heard on our stage. On  
any stage... Ever.

The two men now looking each other in the eye.

JONSON (CONT'D)  
(sotto)  
You are the soul of the age...

Oxford smiles at the thought of it. Then--

OXFORD  
Promise me... promise me, Jonson, that  
you will keep our secret safe. That  
you won't expose Shakespeare...

JONSON  
My lord?

OXFORD  
I have seen it in your face... He  
vexes you. How could he not? But he  
is not your burden. He is mine.

Then he nods to the manuscripts by his side.

OXFORD (CONT'D)  
All my writings. The plays, the  
sonnets... Keep them safe. Keep them  
from my family. From the Cecil's.  
Wait a few years, and then, publish  
them.

Jonson looks stricken.

JONSON  
I am not worthy of this charge, my  
lord. I... I betrayed you... I told  
them of your--

OXFORD  
I have made it my life to know the  
character of men, Jonson. I know you.  
You may have betrayed me, but you will  
never betray my words...

He puts the last manuscript on the pile.

Jonson looks at the--

FRONT PAGE

Which reads "DEDICATION", then more words, starting with:

"To the Earl of Southampton"

158 INT. OXFORD STONE - OUTSIDE OXFORD'S BEDROOM - DUSK 158

Jonson leaves Oxford's room, visibly shaken. The manuscripts are under his arm.

Anne, Oxford's wife is still there, surround by doctors.

Then she sees Jonson leaving.

ANNE

Get out! You, your friends, your blasphemous theaters, have brought nothing but ruin and dishonor to this family.

JONSON

Ruin? Dishonor? Madam. You, your family, me, even Elizabeth herself shall be remembered solely because we had the honor to live whilst your husband put ink to paper.

He turns and exits.

CUT TO:

159 EXT. OXFORD STONE - DUSK 159

Jonson exits the building and walks away. He reads the dedication on the first page of the manuscript as he walks.

JONSON (V.O.)

To the Earl of Southampton. The love I dedicate to your lordship is without end; whereof this pamphlet, without beginning, is but a superfluous moiety.

Jonson freezes, and looks back at Oxford's house, realizing there is another whole layer to all this; exactly what he can only guess.

CUT TO:

137

160 INT. OXFORD STONE - OXFORD'S ROOM - NIGHT 160

A few hours later. Oxford has died in his bed. Anne watches as a doctor covers his face with a sheet.

JONSON (V.O.)  
 What I have done is yours; what I have  
 to do is yours; being part in all I  
 have, devoted, yours.

161 EXT. A SMALL CHURCH - DAY 161

A casket is being interred into the family mausoleum. Anne is there, as are Oxford's children. So is Robert Cecil.

JONSON (V.O.)  
 Were my worth greater, my duty would  
 show greater; meantime, as it is, it  
 is bound to your lordship, to whom I  
 wish long life... still lengthened  
 with all happiness.

Southampton is there as well. Watching. Tears roll down his cheeks.

CUT TO:

162 INT. TOWER OF LONDON - INTERROGATION ROOM - NIGHT 162

Where we began.

A bucket of water is DUMPED on Jonson. He regains consciousness and looks around. Somewhat confused he sees:

Robert Cecil limping out of the dark towards him. Robert Cecil leans down, and very close to his ear, whispers:

CECIL  
 I can make all this go away, Jonson...  
 To be but a dream. Like one of your  
 plays... Or, I can bring you so much  
 pain-- pain that were you given a  
 thousand years, and a thousand quills,  
 you could never justly describe...

Cecil steps back.

CECIL (CONT'D)

I know you have them. All his manuscripts. My sister saw you leave Oxford Stone with them under your arm.

Jonson takes a long time before answering. Will he betray Oxford?

JONSON

They were destroyed... burned... by your own men...

Cecil doesn't know whether to believe him or not.

INTERROGATOR

He's lying...

JONSON

My lord? Why would I lie? Is there a man alive who has reason to hate him more than I?

Jonson stares directly at Cecil, knowing he is speaking about Cecil as well as himself.

JONSON (CONT'D)

He was something I could never be. An undeniable perfection... that plagued my soul... And to him I was... nothing. A messenger. Nothing more.

Cecil stares into his eyes for a long moment, searching for the truth. Then he smiles.

CECIL

Let him go! He tells the truth.

Robert Cecil turns to leave, but then turns a last time.

CECIL (CONT'D)

And Jonson-- better him, won't you? Wipe his memory for all time. For you. And for me.

Robert Cecil smiles at Jonson, who can only stare at him. Finally:

JONSON

(sotto)

I am afraid that this is not possible, my lord.

Robert Cecil's smile freezes and he leaves.

163 EXT. STREET IN FRONT OF TOWER OF LONDON - DAWN 163

Jonson is getting released. He walks away....a lonely figure.

164 EXT. THE ROSE THEATER - DAWN 164

Wide from above...Still smoking from the fire...All the sudden we make out Jonson searching through the rubble.

164A INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - AUDIENCE CHAMBER - NIGHT 164A

Set for a Court performance of a play. Courtiers bow as King James I enters the chamber, Robert Cecil two steps behind him. James takes his seat right in front of the stage, as Elizabeth used to.

164B EXT. THE ROSE THEATER - DAWN 164B

Jonson's eyes search the ground. And, eventually, he finds it--

THE METAL BOX

that seems to somehow have survived the conflagration.

JONSON

opens the box.

INSIDE THE BOX

Are the manuscripts Oxford gave him. Jonson smiles, relieved. They are singed at the edges, but they are there. We hear--

PROLOGUE (O.S.)

O-- for a muse of fire... that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention...

DISSOLVE TO:

AN ACTOR

playing Prologue. He is the same actor who introduced the "play" at the beginning of the film. But now he wears Elizabethan clothing-- but again, all monochromatic and grey.

PROLOGUE (CONT'D)

A kingdom for a stage, princes to act,  
and monarchs to behold the swelling  
scene!

165 INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - AUDIENCE CHAMBER - NIGHT 165

And he is standing on the stage.

PROLOGUE

Let us, ciphers to this great accompt,  
on your imaginary forces work.

King James' watches enthusiastically, Robert Cecil  
right next to him.

JAMES I

We had seen some of this Shakespeare's  
plays in Edinburgh, Sir Robert. I  
must tell you, we enjoyed them  
immensely, and look forward to seeing  
many more, now that we are in  
London... I presume you are as avid a  
theater man as myself?

Robert Cecil's smile remains frozen.

ROBERT CECIL

Of course, your majesty...

The CAMERA moves away from them and we realize we are  
on the theater stage where we started.

166 INT. BROADWAY THEATER - STAGE - DUSK 166

"Prologue" turns and addresses his audience (and us) in  
the modern theater.

PROLOGUE

Robert Cecil remained the most powerful  
man in the Court of King James, though he  
could not prevent the public theaters  
from becoming ever more popular. William  
Shakespeare, however, spent the remaining  
years of his life not in the playhouses  
of London, but in the small town of his  
birth, Stratford upon Avon, as a  
businessman and grain merchant.

(beat)

(MORE)

PROLOGUE (CONT'D)

Ben Jonson succeeded in his desire to be the most celebrated playwright of his time, becoming England's first Poet Laureate. And in 1623, he wrote the dedication to the collected works of the man we call William Shakespeare.

(beat)

And so... though our story is finished, our poet's is not. For his monument is ever-living, made not of stone but of verse, and it shall be remembered... as long as words are made of breath and breath of life.

The curtains close.

END CREDITS start to roll...

FADE OUT.