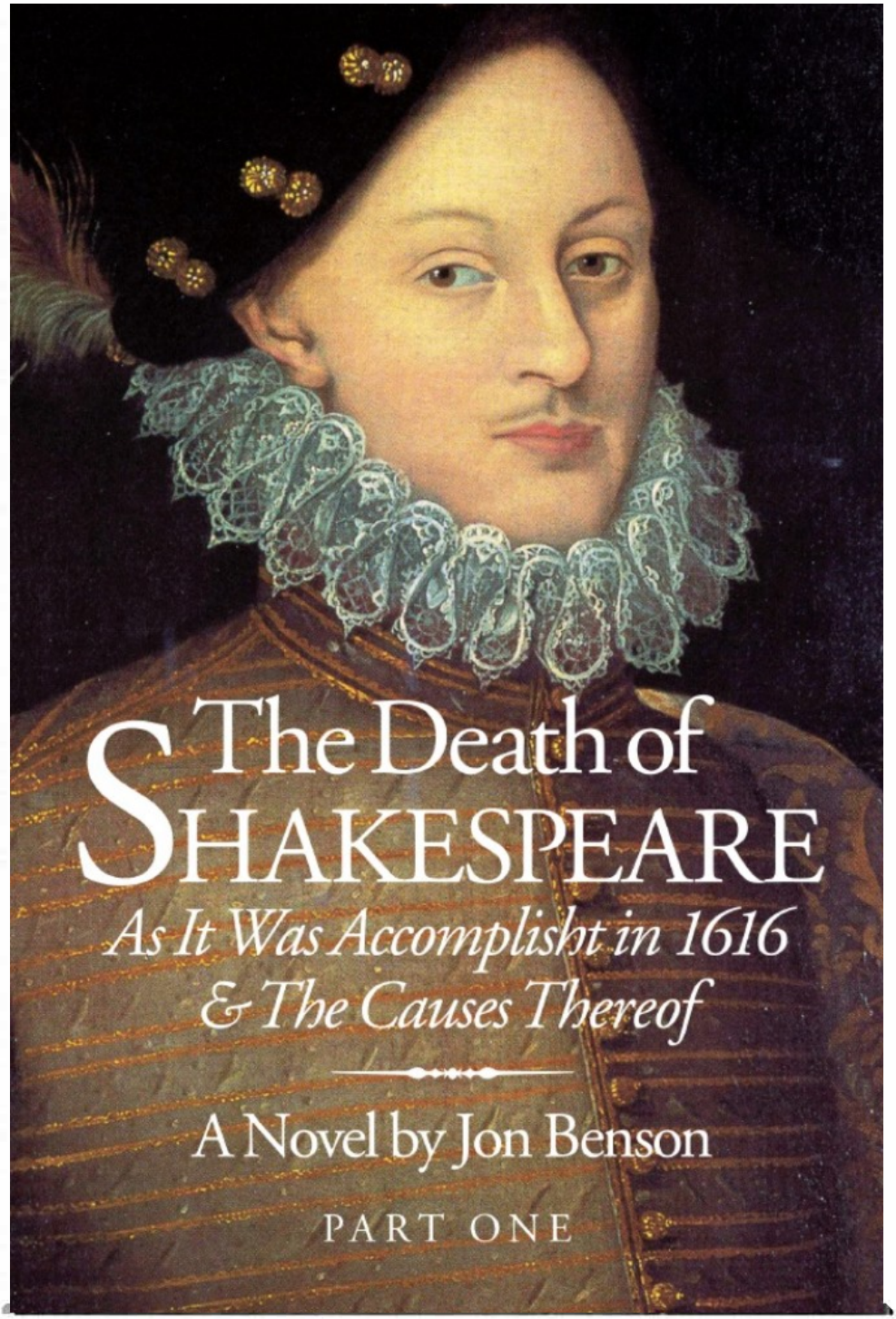

The Death of
SHAKESPEARE
As It Was Accomplisht in 1616
& The Causes Thereof
A Novel by Jon Benson
PART ONE

William Shakespeare is believed by many to have written the greatest plays the world has ever seen. There is no record of his education, if he had any. His parents, wife, and children may have been illiterate. He left no books. No one reported in any diary or letter that they had met him or talked to him, or even talked *about* him.

He left six signatures, all different. Three were on his last will and testament, which makes no mention of any plays, poems, or books; two were on deeds to real property; the last was on an affidavit he gave in a court case.

The records show a businessman who acquired considerable property during his lifetime, hoarded grain during a famine, and engaged in a number of lawsuits, one over as little as five pounds. He was connected with the theater, but there is nothing that *independently* proves he was the author of the plays attributed to him. Mark Twain, Sigmund Freud, Orson Welles, Sir Lawrence Olivier, Sir Derek Jacobi, Walt Whitman, and many others, including a number of United States Supreme Court justices, have all concluded that William Shakespeare did not write the plays. But if he didn't, who did? And if someone else was the greatest author who ever lived, why was Shakespeare given the credit? *The Death of Shakespeare* explains how this happened, and why the Bard of Avon paid with his life for his part in, to use the words of Henry James, "the biggest and most successful fraud ever practiced on a patient world."



www.doshakespeare.com

The Death of SHAKESPEARE

As It Was Accomplisht in 1616
& The Causes Thereof

A Novel by Jon Benson

PART ONE

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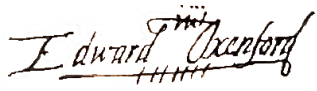
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The  at the end of each chapter
is the crown in the Earl of Oxford's signature:



The story of how The Earl of Oxford
wrote the poetry and plays attributed to
William Shakespeare
continues in *The Death of Shakespeare – Part Two*

Readers interested in further information can purchase
The Reader's Companion to the Death of Shakespeare
for research and comments keyed to each chapter

The Death of Shakespeare and *The Reader's Companion*
are available as E-Books

www.doshakespeare.com

To Elizabeth Regina, who took many secrets with her to the grave.

Degree being vizarded,
The unworthiest shows as fairly in the mask.

Troilus and Cressida, Act I, Scene 3

Why write I still all one, ever the same,
And keep invention in a noted weed,
That every word doth almost tell my name,
Showing their birth and where they did proceed?

Sonnet LXXVI

Far fly thy fame,
Most, most of me beloved, whose silent name
One letter bounds.
Thy unvalu'd worth
Shall mount fair place when Apes are turned forth.

Scourge of Villainy, John Marston (1598)

To the Gentle Reader

This Booke, that thou here seest put,
It was for gentle Oxford cut;
Wherein the Author had a strife
With History to show Lord Oxford's life.

O, if only those who knew his wit
Had said the plays by him were writ,
There'd be no need to here reclaim
The name purloined by Shakespeare's fame.

Grave Spenser need not shift more nigh
Our Chaucer, nor Beaumont nearer Spenser lye;
Let them sleep, Westminster lords,
The world now knows the plays are Oxenford's.
Their every word sings he wrote the plays,
And in his Moniment Shakespeare slays.

Elizabeth knew of noble lords
Who wrote well but suppressed their words,
Or let them publish in another's name,
Thereby losing deservèd fame.

The author here his name must also feign,
Lest he, too, in academia, be slain.
Therefore, Gentle Reader, looke
Not on his name but on his Booke.—J.B.



The Authorship Question

William Shakespeare is believed by many to have written the greatest plays the world has even seen. There is no record of his education, if he had any. His parents, wife, and children may have been illiterate. He left no books. No one reported in any diary or letter that they had met him or talked to him or even talked *about* him.

He left six signatures, all different. Three were on his last will and testament, which makes no mention of any plays, poems, or books; two were on deeds to real property; the last was found on an affidavit he gave in a court case.

The records show a businessman who acquired considerable property during his lifetime, hoarded grain during a famine, and engaged in a number of lawsuits, one over as little as five pounds. He was connected with the theater, but there is nothing that *independently* proves he was the author of the plays attributed to him.

These missing facts, plus the nature of the plays themselves – thirty-seven of the thirty-eight plays he supposedly wrote were about royalty and nobility with only *The Merry Wives of Windsor* being about commoners – have created the Authorship Question. Many students of the plays have concluded Shakespeare was a front for someone else. The list is long. It includes Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Sigmund Freud, Sir Derek Jacobi, Hugh Trevor-Roper and many others. Visit https://doubtaboutwill.org/declaration to learn more.

But if Shakespeare did not write the plays, who did? And if someone else was the greatest writer who ever lived, why was Shakespeare give the credit? *The Death of Shakespeare* explains how this happened, and why the Bard of Avon paid with his life for his part in, to use the words of Henry James, "the biggest and most successful fraud ever practiced on a patient world."

The story of how the Earl of Oxford wrote the poetry and plays attributed to William Shakespeare begins in Part One of *The Death of Shakespeare*. Readers interested in further information can purchase *The Reader's Companion to the Death of Shakespeare* for comments keyed to each chapter. *The Death of Shakespeare*, Parts One and Two, and *The Reader's Companion* are available in print and E-Book versions at amazon.com. For more information, visit *www.doshakespeare.com*.

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The Earls of Southampton
The Earls of Derby
Peregrine Bertie, Lord Willoughby de Eresby
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The Lords Hunsdon
The Sidney Family

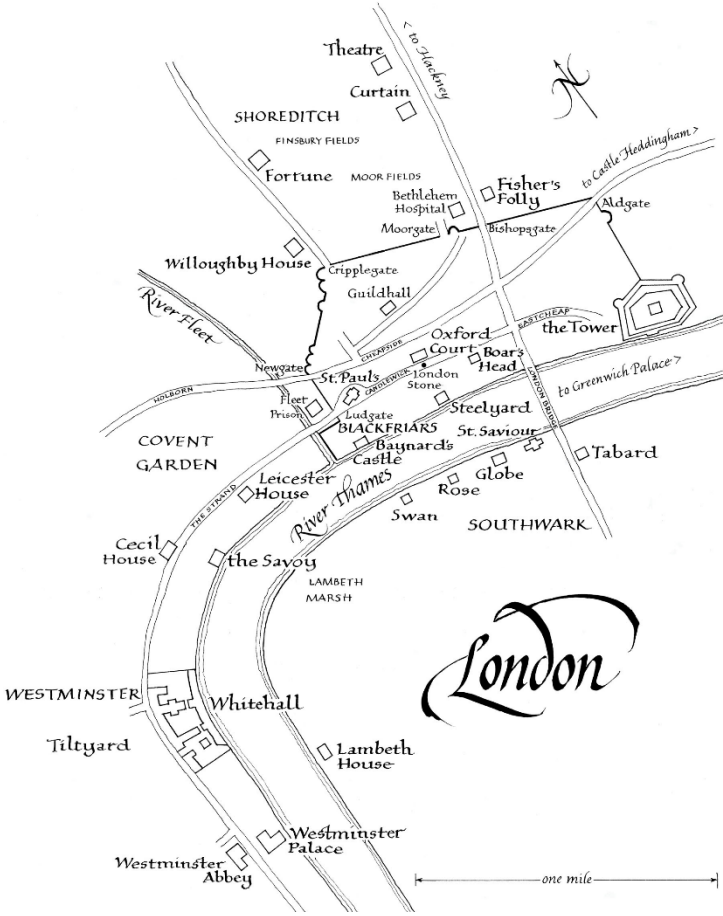
Glossary

Afterword

Questions for a Stratfordian

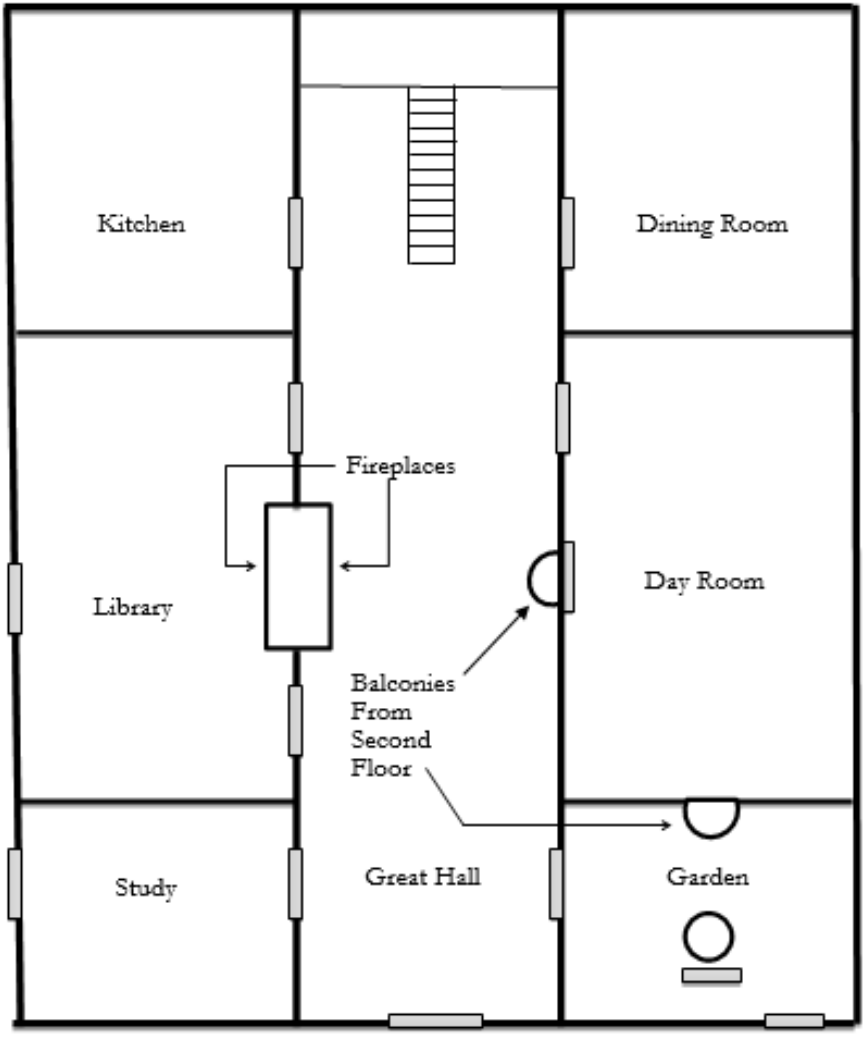
More Information


N
Grimsthorpe
Stamford
Stratford-upon-Avon
Billesley
R. Avon
Ditchley
Cambridge
Castle Hedingham
Earls Colne
R. Colne
Colchester
Wivenhoe
Oxford
R. Thames
Theobalds
Hackney
Windsor
LONDON
Richmond
Greenwich
Bristol
Bath
Wilton
Gads Hill
Canterbury
Southampton
Dover
Titchfield Abbey
English Channel
England


Theatre
Curtain
SHOREDITCH
FINSBURY FIELDS
Fortune
MOOR FIELDS
Bethlehem Hospital
Moorgate
Fisher's Folly
Bishopsgate
Aldgate
to Castle Heddingham
to Hackney
Willoughby House
Cripplegate
Guildhall
River Fleet
Oxford Court
Boar's Head
the Tower
ALDERSGATE
CHEAPSIDE
Newgate
St. Paul's
London Stone
OLD JEWRY
HOLBORN
Fleet Prison
Ludgate
Steelyard
to Greenwich Palace
BLACKFRIARS
St. Saviour
COVENT GARDEN
Baynard's Castle
Tabard
Leicester House
THE STRAND
River Thames
Globe
Rose
Swan
SOUTHWARK
Cecil House
the Savoy
LAMBETH MARSH
London
WESTMINSTER
Whitehall
Tiltyard
Lambeth House
Westminster Palace
Westminster Abbey
one mile

Oxford Court

First Floor



Candlewick Street

Dramatis Personae

(Names of historical figures are boldfaced)

Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford (Oxford)

Anne Cecil (Nan), Oxford's first wife, mother of his daughters **Elizabeth (Lisbeth), Bridget,** and **Susan**

Elizabeth Trentham (Elspeth), Oxford's second wife, mother of his son and heir, **Henry de Vere**, 18th Earl of Oxford.

Anne Vavasour (Anne), lady-in-waiting to Queen Elizabeth, mother of Oxford's bastard son, Edward Vere

William Shakespeare (William Shackspear, Willum)

Anne Hathaway, Shakespeare's wife, mother of his children, **Susanna**, **Hamnet**, and **Judith**

Elizabeth Tudor, Queen Elizabeth I of England

Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton, putative son of Oxford and Queen Elizabeth

William Cecil, Baron Burghley, Oxford's guardian and father-in-law, and the Queen's most trusted minister

Sir Robert Cecil, Burghley's second son and successor to his father's offices

William Stanley, 6th Earl of Derby, married Lisbeth Vere

Francis Norris, Baron of Rycote, married Bridget Vere

Philip Herbert, Earl of Montgomery, married Susan Vere and was one of the "incomparable pair of brethren" to whom the First Folio was dedicated

Peregrine Bertie, Lord Willoughby de Eresby, twice ambassador to Denmark, who married **Mary Vere**, Oxford's sister

Aemilia Bassano, first published English female poet, the Dark Lady of the sonnets, mistress to **Henry Carey**, 1st Lord Hunsdon

Arthur Golding, Oxford's uncle and translator of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*; brother of **Marjory Golding**, wife of **Earl John**, 16th Earl of Oxford, Oxford's father

Lettice Knollys, dowager Countess of Essex and Leicester, widow of the 1st Earl of Essex and mother of **Robert Dudley**, 2nd Earl of Essex, beheaded in 1601

William Brooke, 10th Baron Cobham, Lord Chamberlain from August 1596 until his death on 6 March 1597; father of **Elizabeth Brooke**, wife of Sir Robert Cecil

Anthony Munday, **John Lyly**, **Christopher Marlowe**, **Ben Jonson**, **John Marston**, playwrights

Philip Henslowe, manager/impresario of the Rose Theater

James Burbage, manager/impresario of the Theater

Richard Burbage, actor, member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men

Dr. Rodrigo López, physician to the queen, executed for allegedly trying to poison her

Michael Lok, to whom Oxford owed £3,000, induces Oxford to write a play about Jews that becomes *The Merchant of Venice*

Rowland Yorke, servant to Earl John and father of **Rowland Yorke**. Oxford knew the father as Yorick. The son falsely told Oxford that Nan had cheated on him while he was in Italy and, therefore, Lisbeth was not his daughter

Thomas Brincknell, undercook in Cecil House. Oxford, while a ward at Cecil House, stabbed him in the thigh, killing him; Lilah Stanhope, his fiancé/maidservant to Oxford's daughter, Susan

Joan Jockey, love interest of Earl John, whose retainers cut off her face so he would put her away

Marcus Gheeraerts, Dutch artist, who painted the Ditchley Portrait and the Pregnancy Portrait

Sir John Falstaff, knight; Tupp, his page

Peaches Bottomsup, barmaid in the Boar's Head

Robin, Oxford's page

Finley, former classmate of Oxford's at Cambridge, failed playwright, seeking to have plays considered worthy of study

Malfis, Oxford's lawyer

Nigel, Oxford's steward

Timson, Oxford's manservant

Thomas Digby, Oxford's steward at Hedingham Castle

Tobias, Oxford's whiffler

The Death of SHAKESPEARE



Portrait of William Shakespeare from the cover of the *First Folio* (1623)

1616

~ Prologue ~
Stratford-upon-Avon - April 23, 1616

The knock came earlier than expected. Anne Shackspear opened the door and looked out into the teeming rain. A man dressed in a brown cape and broad-brimmed felt hat filled the doorway. He pulled back the cape at his neck, exposing a white collar.

"Father," she said, swinging the door open. "We are so grateful you have come." The priest stepped inside. He took off his hat, uncovering a thick head of brown hair flecked with gray. His face was wide. Heavy jowls sagged either side of a thick-lipped mouth. He handed her his hat. "I am Anne Shackspear," she said nervously, as she took it. "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned."

The priest offered his hand; Anne bent forward and kissed it. He peeled off the cloak and exposed the white collar again, which shone even brighter in the dark room. Anne was pleased to see that the priest was large. Priests should be well-fed, she thought. Let the Puritans show their bones like the cattle dying in the fields outside Stratford. She herself was a stump of a woman, made shorter by years of carrying milk pails on her father's farm. A large purse and heavy keys hung off her belt.

"William worried that a priest would be afraid to visit him here," she said, as she hung up the priest's cloak. "Where have you come from, Father?"

"Take me to him," the priest said.

Anne started for the stairs. "He has not gotten out of bed for days," she said over her shoulder, "for reasons my son-in-law, a doctor, cannot discover. Perhaps it's his grief over my second daughter's marriage, so recently besmutched." The priest followed close behind, almost pushing her up the stairs. She stopped prattling. At the top, she pointed to a dark bedroom.

"Leave us," the priest said. Anne went back downstairs as the priest entered the room and closed the door behind him. Shackspear lay in a wide bed with turned posts but no canopy. A silk tapestry that depicted scenes from *The Book of Martyrs* hung on the wall over his

head, a recent acquisition from how clean and bright it was in contrast to the rest of the dingy room. A small portrait of Shackspear hung on the wall on the other side of the bed.

Shackspear looked up and saw the priest. "Father!" he exclaimed. "Thank you for coming! I despaired I would leave this life before I was confessed."

The priest walked over to the bed. His eyes swept the room. "Have you sinned, my son?"

"Yes, Father! My conscience hath a thousand tongues, one for every sin I have committed! They crowd the bar," he cried, waving a bony finger over the priest's head, as if a gallery of wraiths behind the priest were hooting 'Guilty! Guilty!'

The priest looked mildly surprised. "What kind of sins, my son?"

"*I stole a man's name, Father*."

The priest smiled indulgently. "I thought you were going to confess to something worse, like murder."

Shackspear shook his head. "Killing a man only shortens his life. *Stealing his name means no one will remember him after he is gone! It's as if he had been erased! As if he had never been born*!"

He reached over and picked up a document from the nightstand. He handed it to the priest. His hand was shaking. "I have written a confession based on the one Father Campion gave my father." The priest made the sign of the cross. Shackspear saw this and was pleased.

The priest took the confession and started to look through it. "And whose name have you stolen?"

"The Earl of Oxford's, Father. The queen made me do it. She said the Earl would write plays and my name would go on them, and if I ever told anyone …" He made a slashing movement across his throat. "But she is dead now, as so many others are …" He lost his train of thought, his eyes drifting away.

"Have you told this to others?" the priest asked.

"Only to my wife and daughters."

"And what do they say?"

"They laugh at me. They say I'm an old man. They know nothing of the theater. They can't even read. Confess me, Father."

"Where *are* the plays?"

"Oxford kept them."

"And the drafts he wrote?"

"He kept everything, even the foul papers. But they would've done you no good if you had them. He wrote the way water bugs skitter across a pond, or lightning runs across the sky. No one could read what he wrote; except Robin, of course, or Lyly when Lyly was his secretary. Oxford wrote all the time. And, when he wasn't writing, he was dictating. *And putting my name on it!*"

Shackspear stopped as if he suddenly remembered something. "'Twas only right, of course," he said, a firmness appearing in his voice for the first time. "After all, who made the plays work so the public would pay good money to see them? *I did*. Who was it added parts he'd never thought of, or rewrote speeches that would have drowned a fish? *I did*. Without me, the Earl would have been just another recluse scribbling away in some moldering castle. *I gave his ideas to the world*!"

The priest said nothing.

Shackspear thought the priest didn't believe him. He bristled. "I did, I tell ye. Oxford resisted at first, of course, he being a lord and me a commoner, but he finally began to understand what I could bring to our 'partnership.' I brought him back to Earth, I did, and I became famous."

"At least in London."

"Aye, in London, but not in Puritan-diseased Stratford!" This turn in the conversation appeared to confuse him, and for a moment he didn't say anything, seemingly lost. Then he looked up at the priest. "When the queen died, Oxford wanted to go back on our 'contract.' He wanted me to tell the world that he had written *Hamlet* and *The Merchant* and all the rest. But how could I give up being the immortal playwright I had become and return to being just a nameless actor again? 'Our Roscius!' Jonson would call out when I walked into the Mermaid. I was famous! I would never die, as long as there was a theater somewhere and people could read."

"So, you said no."

Shackspear nodded. "I told Oxford he was dying, not me, and I would continue to enjoy the fame Fortune had given me, thank you very much. And so he died, a never writer to an ever reader. And I'm the only one left who knows the truth."

"Yes," the priest said quietly.

Shackspear's river of words dried up. He lay still, staring off in space. Then he turned to the priest. "I wasn't facing God then - Oxford was! But now it's my turn, Father, and God won't ask me what I did - *he will know*!"

The priest made no comment. He looked around the room. "Do you have any books? I don't see any."

Shackspear laughed. "No. I can read, mark you, and write. I received a good education in the Guild Hall, at least whilst I was there, but I never liked reading and writing. Acting took me to London. I thought I was good, but no one else did. But there was lots of money to be made by putting on shows and I decided that if I couldn't be a player, I would be a manager. None of the players knew how to run a business. It was easy to step in and become their manager. They're all rich now - *because of me*."

"Well, you certainly suffer from the sin of pride," the priest commented drolly, surprising Shackspear. "And you lack humility, my son. Are you not the man who hid grain while his neighbors starved?" Shackspear sat up. "Are you not the man known as 'Pimping Billy' in London who arranged for women to lie on their backs while men on top paid silver to you and Francis Langley?" Shackspear's jaw dropped. The priest went on, his voice rising. "Do you think brief religion can make up for foul deeds committed over a lifetime? A short 'Hail Mary' availeth you not, I'm afraid."

Shackspear was terrified. "Do not abandon me, Father. For the love of Mary and Jesus, do not let me go to my Maker clothed in sin." He reached over and grabbed the Confession from the nightstand. He pressed it into the priest's hands. "Give this to Sir Francis Bacon. He is an honest man. He will see to it that justice is done. Swear it," Shackspear begged, pulling on the priest's sleeve.

"I swear," the priest said without emotion.

"Then confess me, Father, for I have sinned."

The priest took the Bible off the nightstand and put it on the bed. He placed Shackspear's hand on the Bible and began to chant in Latin when Shackspear pulled his hand away and sat upright.

"Wait! You're not a priest! You're Nicholas Skerret!"

"Skerres," the larger man growled. "*Nicholas Skerres*! You never got anything right, did you, *Willum*!" He grabbed a pillow and slammed it down over Shackspear's face like a mason smashing a tile into wet mortar. He climbed onto the bed and leaned all his weight into the pillow.

"You made me stand with a spear in *Julius Caesar*," he said through clenched teeth, "but your only role was croaking 'swear, swear' from beneath the stage in *Hamlet*!" Shackspear was calling out for help, but his cries were muffled. His legs vainly kicked up at the man on top of him. "When I asked for better parts, you said I couldn't act. 'Just

business,' you told me. Well, what thinks you now of how I played my part? *You knew me not!*"

Shackspear was still struggling but could not get the larger man off him.

"For you," Nicholas Skerres went on, "the world became a stage where you played 'author,' but now you exit to a grander stage where the role of ghost surely awaits you. It's just business, right?"

Shackspear finally stopped moving. Skerres climbed off the bed. He laid a finger along Shackspear's neck. "He's dead!" Skerres said after a moment. "The last living person who knew the truth is no more." He slipped the pillow back under Shackspear's head, fluffing it up and straightening the bedclothes.

He turned his attention to the nightstand. He opened the drawer and pawed through the jars of ointment and medicines inside with his thick fingers, finally pulling out a gold ring. "A seal ring," he said, holding it up. He could read the initials "WS" in reverse. "He won't be needing *this* anymore." He dropped the ring into a pocket inside his belt.

He pulled a poem out of a second drawer. He picked up a candle and read it aloud:

> *Good friend for Jesus sake forbeare.*
> *To dig the dust encloased heare:*
> *Blesse be the man that spares these stones,*
> *And curst be he that moves my bones.*

Skerres sniffed. "If this were cheese," he said, looking at Shackspear, "you'd have been dead before I got here. You want this on your gravestone? You deserve it." He put the poem back in the drawer.

He picked up the pages of a will and scanned them quickly. He noticed that Shackspear had left nothing for his London playhouse friends. Picking up a quill, Skerres dipped it into the pot of ink on the nightstand and added between the lines on the third page: "*and to my Fellowes, John Hemynges, Richard Burbage, and Henry Cundell, XXVI viij Apeece, to buy them ringes.*" Skerres noticed the signature lines were blank. Shackspear had put off signing the will. "Too late now," Skerres muttered. "Maybe his wife downstairs will sign it."

He walked around the bed to look more closely at the portrait on the far wall. Something was odd. Shackspear's eyes looked like they were both right eyes. Or were they left eyes? He couldn't tell. The bulbous head was right, but the tunic was too small, and the shoulder-wings were oversized. Was the right arm the left in reverse? And the

ruff: it made Shackspear's head seem to float in the air. "Martin's done better than this," Skerres said. Then he saw the bold line that started under Shackspear's chin and ran up the side of his head. A broad grin spread across Skerres's face.

"A mask!" he said aloud. Laughter began to rumble through his belly. His tiny brown eyes disappeared into the folds of his fat face. "Martin did a portrait of him as a mask and the fool hung it in his own bedroom!" His laughter grew until it filled the room. He finally forced himself to stop. He put a serious look on his face, straightened the clerical collar he was wearing, and went downstairs.

"He is resting peacefully," he said to Anne Shackspear at the bottom of the stairs. "Are there any books or papers in the house? I want to make sure there's nothing here that might embarrass the Church."

"No books, Father. In Stratford, we have to hide our faith in our hearts."

"I'll look around." He strode off into the house but was back shortly.

"I leave," he announced.

"Bless you, Father." Anne helped him on with his cloak. "I'm sure William well-liked your visit."

"He did."

Anne opened the back door. Skerres jammed his hat down over his head and stepped out into the rain. He went down the garden path past the barn, oblivious of Venus, Shackspear's barren mare, watching him as he went by. He walked past Holy Trinity to a wooden bridge that swayed back and forth in the surging waters of the Avon. He crossed the bridge and continued on a mile to a carriage waiting under a grove of sycamores. Two horses, coach fellows, stood in the rain. The driver sat up high, huddled under an enormous cape. Skerres opened the door to the carriage and got in. Two men waited inside. A few minutes later a side window opened and the seal ring Skerres had taken was thrown out onto the ground. This was followed by a thump from inside the carriage. The driver flipped the cape off his head and snapped his whip. The horses came to life and the carriage careened up onto the road, crushing the ring into the mud as it disappeared into the night toward London.



1588

~ 1 ~
Fisher's Folly - September 27, 1588

It was a cold, crisp day, a day that tells the trees it's time to start tucking in for winter, a day that stills the songbirds and sends them south. "And a good day to see the queen," the 17th Earl of Oxford said aloud as he came out onto the second-floor gallery that ran around the courtyard in front of him.

"Nigel!" he called out. The night air had strung a necklace of diamonds along the railing in front of him. He touched one; it instantly disappeared. He jumped back, delighted.

"My lord," a voice answered from nearby. A tall man dressed in a dark green jacket appeared. The lapels of his jacket were black, as was his hair, which had been slicked over his head and knotted at the back.

"Must I do everything? You know I see the queen today. Where is my dresser?"

"I regret to say, my lord, that he is no longer in your service."

"And why is that?"

"Because he has not been paid, my lord."

"Not been paid? How is that possible?"

Nigel looked pained. "Money …," he started to say but Oxford immediately looked away. "But your clothes are ready, your lordship." Nigel gestured toward the room behind him. Oxford was about to follow him when he spied two men fencing in the courtyard below. He leaned over the railing and watched them for a moment.

"No, no, no," he called out. "Anthony, your back foot is wrong. It should be pointing away from your opponent." He rotated his right foot so that it was pointed down the walkway. Whether the men below could see his foot was unclear.

A faint "my lord" floated up from the courtyard below.

"And where is the rest of the play you've been working on?"

"Two sheets in folio, my lord. The rest, up here," the man called Anthony said, tapping the right side of his head with his index finger.

"Then I suggest you 'distill' your play onto paper before you continue with John Lyly here, lest he spit you on his sword, leaving your work in naught but airy thought." His words marched away from him in the cold morning air. "Like mine here, so quickly gone."

Nigel leaned out of the room. "My lord, neither the Sun nor the queen waits for anyone, even the Earl of Oxford."

"True," Oxford said. He began to turn away when a hostler appeared in the courtyard below walking two horses toward the gate that opened onto Bishopsgate Street. "Ho!" Oxford shouted. "Let go those horses!" The man looked up but did not stop. The two fencers stepped aside to let him pass. "Nigel! Why is that man taking away my horses?"

Nigel came back out. He did not look over the railing. "Because they have not been paid for, my lord."

"Even so," Oxford said, "they are *my* horses and they cannot be repossessed *without benefit of law*! Fetch my solicitor! Tell him to file a writ!"

"I have already spoken with Malfis, my lord. He said that the owner can take them back because we have not yet finished paying for them. Title was to transfer upon full payment, but …"

"Why was I not told this?"

"You were, my lord."

Oxford lowered his voice. "Is there nothing left?"

"Very little." Nigel looked out over the compound that surrounded the courtyard below them. "Many live here, my lord, but few pay for the privilege. Or for their board. They all claim they are providing you a service. John Lyly, for example says you need him as secretary when the 'Muse' seizes you."

"True," Oxford said. "And I see the queen today." He brightened. "And she will order me to write plays to ornament her court now that the Spanish have been defeated and run for home." He leaned on the railing:

> *The lively larke stretcht forth her wing,*
> *The messenger of morninge bright*

A sparrow landed on the railing to his right and bounced toward him.

"Shoo!" he said. The bird hopped back and gave him a baleful look. "I sing only to larks this morning."

"My lord," Nigel said, a pained expression on his face.

Oxford turned away from the sparrow and began to follow Nigel back into the room he had come out of. "And which doublet have you chosen for me today?"

"A new one," Nigel said, a touch of enthusiasm appearing in his voice for the first time. He held up a doublet of gray silk woven with a tiny thread the shade of the green mantle one sees only on the surface of a still pond in August. The front of the doublet was speckled with small tufts that appeared to be pearls but which, upon closer examination, were a complicated weaving of satin thread the color of polished pewter. The fabric of the upper part of the doublet continued out beyond the shoulders, which were ruffed and flared to suggest the sleeves that were not there. The front of the doublet was ornamented with a cascade of gold and black pearls, real this time.

Oxford was pleased. "Good. Good," he said, feeling the silk.

Nigel held up a silk shirt with long sleeves and a starched ruff to frame the garment in white. Oxford put on the shirt.

"Let us not forget the cape," Nigel said. It was made of black velvet. A border of faux pearls, backgrounded by specks of gold, edged the cape. A boar's head the size of a small plum had been embroidered over the heart. Oxford swung the cape over his left shoulder and turned to look at himself in the glass. His left hand pulled the cape across his chest, flashing a gold thumb ring emblazoned with another boar's head.

Nigel's chin rose slightly. "I know the gimlet-eyed ladies at court will count the threads that close the buttonholes and frown if they see anything other than what is expected of the 17th Earl of Oxford."

Oxford nodded in agreement. "But where did you get the silver to pay for this if my horses are being repossessed and my dresser has left my service for lack of money?"

Nigel slid the cape off Oxford's shoulder. "I thought you would be disappointed to learn you had nothing new to wear before the queen today because I had spent what was left on horses and dressers." He said this without innuendo or criticism. Nigel and his family had served the earls of Oxford for time out of mind. Money was tight at the moment but there were benefits to being in service to a family that stretched back 500 years, special privileges from noble families and merchants and, most importantly, from the law courts when leniency was needed. Consequently, those in service stayed when money was in limited supply, the dressing-boy being an exception to the rule.

Oxford, for his part, had no idea how he was financed. He paid as little attention to money as he did to the disappearance of the chamber pot each morning. He adjusted the sleeve of the shirt and looked at Nigel in the mirror. His faithful steward seemed discontented. Maybe it was the hubbub caused by the writers and painters constantly moving in and out and the parties that went on into the night.

"You seem a bit off, Nigel, what with having to manage me and keep me moving forward, like the way a summer voyage can take the sweetness off a barrel of Malmsey."

"I know nothing of Malmsey, my lord," Nigel said.

"You've never taken a sip when word has come down to send more up to the table?"

Nigel shook his head. His master was in a bantering mood, which always made for awkward moments. Nigel had no time for frivolity. Work filled his day. He not only had to deal with the Folly but Castle Hedingham in Essex as well, and Oxford Court in London, along with the Earl's many other properties. Rising before dawn, he would open a leather book and list the tasks for the day, checking them off as he completed them. He also had no sense of humor, a grave failing for anyone in service to the Earl of Oxford. Consequently, he mistook Oxford's comment as criticism.

"I have never tasted of the Malmsey," he said, straightening a sleeve as he looked at the two of them in the mirror.

Oxford laughed. "Of course not. You have always been my honest servant, but I am not used to honesty, Nigel. The court is full of lies. If someone lies, I am usually able to recognize it but there are times …"

Nigel thought Oxford was still talking about him. "My lord," he protested, moving in front of Oxford, "I assure you that I have never tasted of the Malmsey."

Oxford realized Nigel had no idea what he was talking about. "Of course not," he said, taking the ruff from Nigel's hand and slipping it around his neck. "Thank God for that."

Nigel, relieved, busied himself with the rest of Oxford's attire. He handed Oxford the sheath containing his sword, a rapier of damask'd steel. Oxford buckled a narrow belt inside his cape and thrust the sheath down his leg. The matching dagger was slipped inside the belt on the other side. Nigel handed him a felt hat, also black, its short cylindrical top separated from the narrow brim by a border of faux pearls and speckled gold that mimicked the border on the cape. A pair of black gloves completed Oxford's outfit.

Oxford turned to face himself in the mirror. He placed one foot out, tilting his head to one side. Thinning, sandy-colored hair swept over his head. Eyebrows arched over hazel eyes, giving an air of questioning or slight surprise to his face. He laid a finger alongside the trim mustache that fledged his upper lip. "How can she refuse me?" he asked the image in the glass. "Such *sprezzatura*," he said, drifting off.

Nigel had no idea what *sprezzatura* meant. He let his master drift for a moment and then tugged on his sleeve.

"Yes," Oxford said. He ducked into a nearby room, coming out with a sheaf of rolled-up papers tied with a ribbon. "Scenes to dazzle her majesty," he announced, waving the roll of papers around like it was a consul's baton and he was Caesar returning from Gaul. Nigel smiled. There were dozens of plays littering the rooms in the Folly.

"But I have no horse," Oxford said. "Ah. I must go on foot, then."

"Your whiffler waits in the street."

Oxford headed for the stairs.

Nigel watched him go. He had once again overcome his master's lack of purpose and direction to send him out the door a worthy descendent of his ancestors. He took out a small leather book and squinted at the list of tasks he had written down that morning. He scanned the page and saw that he had failed to note that his master was to see the queen. This failure took away some of the satisfaction he had begun to feel. He quickly added 'dress his lrdshp for the Qn' as an interlineation and drew a line through it. Snapping the book shut, his feeling of quiet competence returned.

Oxford went out through the entrance into Bishopsgate Street where he found his whiffler waiting for him.

"Good morrow, Tobias."

Tobias nodded. "My lord."

Tobias was a very large African man, ebony in color. He was dressed in a tawny overshirt emblazoned with a blue boar on his right shoulder. He wore a dark purple hat with a rolled-up brim on his head; thick leather boots protected his feet. Two immense fists hung either side of him like resting hammers. In one, he held a gilded pomander given to Oxford's grandfather by a French count. A trail of smoke floated away from the smoldering mixture of cinnamon, cloves, musk, and other aromatics Nigel had stuffed into it.

Tobias moved out into the street. "Holla! Make way for the Earl of Oxford," he cried, pushing people away with one hand while he swung the pomander in dangerous arcs over their heads with the other.

The street stank of urine, manure, rotten cabbage, and mutton fat. Oxford raised a perfumed glove to his face to ward of the odors that assaulted him and stayed close behind Tobias.

Bethlehem Hospital, or Bedlam as it was known to the citizens of London, was directly across the street. Bishopsgate, the main entrance through the Roman wall into London was only a few yards from the Folly. The gate was straddled by a three-story tower. A narrow window in the center of the second floor looked out on the street like the eye of a cyclops. Thick oak doors bound with black iron were closed at night. They were open this bright September morning as a press of people pushed their way through the gate. They stank of sweat and unwashed clothes, of rotting teeth, and of the rancid cheese and sour milk they had eaten before setting out that morning.

"Holla! Make way for the Earl of Oxford," Tobias continued to call out, waving the pompadour in circles around him.

The street widened inside the gate. Oxford stepped around Tobias and started to breathe again. He turned right at Swan Alley, which ended at a narrow door. Tobias took up station just outside while Oxford opened the door and stepped inside, a silver bell announcing his arrival. He was immediately hit by the fragrances that filled the shop. Chaos, most people snorted when they had gotten their breath. Oxford, on the other hand, loved the perfumes and aromatic scents that greeted him. He tried to separate and identify them, something he had done many times in the back of the store with the owner of the shop who suddenly appeared from behind a curtain.

"Signore Baldini!" Oxford cried out, moving off through the barrels and boxes that filled the room.

"My lord," Signore Baldini replied with decidedly less enthusiasm. He attempted a slight bow. He had thin hair and a thinner mustache. He wore a brown tunic and loose breeches. His beard was short, his hair unkempt. He held a long-necked pitcher in his left hand.

"*Maestro* Baldini," Oxford said with added emphasis. "I see the queen this morning, and I *must* have something to amaze her. Have you completed your work on the recipe we were working on last spring, the one with musk oil and a hint of bergamot?"

A pained expression crossed Signore Baldini's face. "My lord," he said, "I value your friendship, your kind help when I came here from Venice, your references to your many friends at court," he said, now animated, waving his hands, but Oxford interrupted him.

"And?"

"But no one pays me," he burst out.

Oxford was dismayed. "How can you say that? Haven't I paid for the gloves you've given me, the perfumes, the cedar boxes?"

Baldini made another face.

"Haven't I?" Oxford asked, beginning to sense that his honor was under attack.

"Si, si," Baldini agreed, the word coming out the way a splinter is pulled out of a flesh wound, slowly and painfully. "But not always right away."

"Oh, but eventually, I'm sure," Oxford said quickly, moving on to the reason why he had come to Baldini's shop. "So what can I take to the queen and dazzle her with your magic once again?"

Baldini sighed. He took out a small leather pouch and held it out for Oxford to sniff. "This, my lord," he said, making sure that Oxford could not grab it, "is something the queen has never experienced." He opened the pouch. "The essence of a desert bush from Morocco that blooms once a year, and then only under moonlight." He slipped a small vial out of the pouch and held it up for Oxford to see. It was a celestial blue slightly darker than a robin's egg. "Taken off a Spanish captain drowned in Ireland this past month. It was in his hand. A cork kept out the ocean and saved the essence he was carrying. The scavengers sold the vial to a merchant in Dublin who sold it to me."

"And the cost to me?" Oxford asked.

"Two pounds, six."

"Done." Oxford reached over and grasped the vial. Baldini resisted for a moment, perhaps in imitation of the dead Spanish captain, but finally let go. Oxford took the leather pouch and headed for the door. "Two pounds, six," he said, confirming what he owed Baldini.

Baldini sighed as Oxford and the vial disappeared. He heard Oxford heading down the alley, the heavy footsteps of Tobias following him. "No piu soldi," he said mournfully, returning to the back of the store, muttering to himself.

Coming out into Bishopsgate Street, Oxford headed toward the river. As he and Tobias got closer, the fishmongers began to fill the street. The smell of seaweed, dried fish, fresh fish, oysters, mussels, and clams mixed with the stench of yesterday's catch. Oxford's glove came back up as Tobias led the way, pushing through the fishmongers who were crying out the names of the fish they were selling: "*Sweet salmon, barbell, trout, chevin, perch, smelt here,*" a woman called out. "*Bream, roach, dace, and gudgeon.*"

Oxford and Tobias arrived at the river stairs where people were boarding boats to carry them across the Thames. An old wherry idled upstream, kept in position by a broad-shouldered man leaning on his oars. He saw Oxford and spun the boat around, backing it skillfully into the stairs.

"Three hours," Oxford said to Tobias. He stepped into the boat. "Good day, John. I am to the queen." The boatman grunted and put his back into the oars, propelling the boat out into the river.

Oxford looked at London Bridge to his left. The day was bright and windy. Flags flew off the houses on the bridge. "A new play," Oxford said to the boatman, waving the roll of papers.

"Would that ye could take her one of my poems."

"Do you have one?"

"Aye," he said. Without missing a stroke, he handed Oxford a piece of paper folded into a tiny square.

"I'll see what I can do," Oxford said, taking the paper.

The tide was going out and the piers that supported the bridge funneled the river into narrow sluices that foamed and roared. Oxford sat down as the wherry disappeared into the darkness under the bridge and was spit out into an anchorage crowded with ships. They were soon alongside Greenwich Palace.



~ 2 ~
Greenwich Palace

The queen had spent the past year at inland palaces while the Spanish sent ships north to invade England. The high wrought-iron fence that kept people from wandering onto the grounds of Greenwich Palace would have done little to stop soldiers if the Spanish had decided to sail up the Thames and attack London. With the defeat of the Armada, Elizabeth returned to Greenwich, her favorite palace, and the place where she had been borne. One of the first things she did was to send word for Oxford to appear before her.

The palace was three stories high and covered with windows to take in the view and fresh air from the river. Bright sunlight silvered the water as Oxford's boat approached and then ran up the polished railings to explode in waves of shimmering light across the building's windows.

"She beckons," he said to himself, as he stepped onto the granite steps that led up from the water. "I am Agamemnon at Troy; William of Normandy at Hastings; Henry Tudor at Milford Haven."

A page waited at the top.

"My lord," the page said. He doffed his cap and bowed, showing thick dark hair as shiny as the wing of a cormorant just up from chasing a fish. The boy was young but handsomely dressed. Somebody's favorite at court, Oxford thought. He took note of the boy's black worsted doublet and green side gown. A pair of black pumps, crosscut for corns, were newly polished with soot and shone like the top of his head. Oxford took the boy to be about twelve and wondered why he had not been met by an officer.

"I am honored to escort you today," the page announced, standing up as he put his hat back on his head.

"As is to be expected," Oxford replied, sweeping past him toward the east end of the palace where the royal apartments were located.

"I regret to inform your lordship," Oxford heard the page say from behind him, "that Her Majesty expects you in the Summer Room." Oxford, with a slight frown, turned to follow the boy who took him to a door opposite the landing stairs. The page opened the door and stepped aside. Oxford strode past him into the gallery.

Oxford had not been in the palace since he and the queen had spent weeks there as lovers. He thought he would be her consort; she had other ideas.

"I am a great admirer of your plays, my lord," the page said, interrupting Oxford's train of thought as they crossed the gallery, their hard-nailed shoes clattering on the slate floor.

"Are you," Oxford said. "But they are performed when servants are not usually in attendance."

"A servant can be invisible, my lord, like paintings on a wall or rugs on the floor. I can slip into a corner and no one notices. Unseen by others, I inhale the nectar of your words."

"'*The nectar of my words*,'" Oxford repeated. He was amused. "And which of my plays have you seen?" He half-expected the boy to name something by Marlowe or Greene.

The page opened a door as they entered another hallway. Several people were coming and going. They nodded to Oxford as they passed. "The best by far was *The True Tragedy of Richard the Third*. Pure magic. I was back in Richard's time, peering into his throne room."

Oxford was surprised. "Any others?"

"I didn't like *The History of Errors*," the page said, then caught himself. He looked up to see how Oxford reacted, but Oxford did not appear to be offended. Reassured, the page went on. "A twin who loses his brother? The plot seemed too thin to carry so many words, like a pail with too much water in it."

Oxford glanced at the boy. "Interesting. Go on."

"*Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark*. The queen didn't like that one."

"True." Oxford remembered the queen telling him there were too many tragical speeches. "What about you?"

"I didn't like it neither. I liked *The Spanish Tragedy*, though. More action. Fewer speeches."

"You think I wrote *The Spanish Tragedy*?"

"Well," the page chattered on, opening another door, "Mr. Kyd's been living at Fisher's Folly for years. What else has he done? Everyone knows you helped John Lyly hatch his *Euphues*." They continued down the hall. "But I liked *Edmund Ironside* and *Thomas of Woodstock* best of all. That's what you should keep writing about - the kings of England!"

Oxford could not resist smiling at the boy's eager face. "I'll consider it."

They walked across another large room. "Begging your pardon, my lord, but may I ask if there is room at the Folly for one more writer who's been bitten by the muse."

"And who might that be?"

"Me," the page said.

"And who is me?"

"Robin, my lord, but they call me 'Scribbler.'"

"And what do you scribble, Robin?"

"Stories, my lord."

"And poetry?"

"No, my lord."

"Some would say that a man is nothing without poetry."

"That may be so," Robin said, opening the door to the next room, "but I am not yet a man."

Oxford glanced down at the page as they swept into the next room. The boy was content being 'not yet a man'?

Robin caught the look on Oxford's face as he headed toward the next door. "And I have no ink in my pot for poetry," he said, his eyes bright.

Oxford said nothing as the two of them walked deeper into the palace. The boy thought Oxford was losing interest in him. "And I can play the lute," he added.

"Ah, you scribble on frets as well as on paper."

"Most commendably, my lord." The boy snatched the cap off his head and went to one knee, presenting the top of his shiny head once again. "I will serve you truly if you put me in your trust: I will say little; fear judgment; fight when I cannot choose otherwise; and eat no fish."

Oxford nodded. "The last, of course, the most important." He waved him up. "So how is it that you are a page here, Robin?"

"I am an orphan, my lord. The Earl of Leicester took me in because he liked my music. He gave me to the queen. He thought she would like my music."

"And does she?"

"She does, my lord, but I want to be a writer."

"But you can't leave the queen's service without her permission."

"She will let me go, my lord. The Earl passed away a fortnight ago and was apparently much loved by her."

"More in death than in life," Oxford commented, unable to stop himself from sniping at the now-dead earl. 'He never really took my place in her heart,' he said to himself. 'That would have been impossible. She only said so out of politics. But, then again, who ever knew what Elizabeth is ever really thinking.' He pushed away thoughts of Leicester and the queen.

"My playing now incites her to tears," Robin went on. "She says it reminds her of him."

"I see," Oxford said as they strode into another hallway. He looked down at the boy. "Come not tomorrow, then, young Robin, but the day after. Three o'clock in the afternoon. You know where?"

"Oh, yes, my lord. Just outside Bishopsgate."

"Aye."

"Where all the writers are," the boy said excitedly.

"Not yet. We've haven't had the pleasure of your company."

"Oh, my lord," the page said, his face crimson with embarrassment. "I cannot thank you enough."

"Oh, but you will," Oxford said. "You will play at supper. I miss good music at even time."

"My lord, I shall not disappoint."

A servant appeared in front of them who gestured for Oxford to follow him. He gave Robin a sharp glance that sent the boy out of sight. The servant opened a door to a small room. "Please wait in here, my lord. Her majesty will send for you."

Oxford stepped into the room. The servant closed the door and disappeared. Oxford sat down on a bench along one of the walls. Silence settled over him. He leaned back and breathed in the air, the scent of the old palace bringing back memories of the time he had spent not only with Elizabeth but with Anne Vavasour, one of Elizabeth's ladies-in-waiting. He had gotten her with child. She delivered it – a boy - in the bedchamber next to the queen's. The memory made him smile. *Oh, did all hell break loose that night*. Oxford had tried to run away but was caught as he boarded a ship. He was bundled back to London and thrown into the Tower with Anne and her new baby.

The queen had been furious. A lady-in-waiting was supposed to be a virgin, like her sovereign. Many dallied, of course, but they usually kept their affairs quiet. Getting pregnant and delivering a baby in the room next to the queen's was unthinkable, but what made it even worse was that Anne's pregnancy had been kept secret from Elizabeth.

She hated secrets. After all, if a pregnant lady-in-waiting could be hidden under her very nose, *what else was going on without her knowledge?* Her anger doubled when Oxford was identified as the father. Even though their affair had ended years earlier, she reacted as though she and Oxford were married and he had cheated on her!

He, of course, thought her rage was more about him than the wounded decorum of her court.

Anne retired to the country after her release from the Tower, taking the baby with her. Oxford had not seen her, or their son since then, but the fireworks Anne had brought to their relationship, as wonderful as they had been when they were lovers, was not something he wanted now. He wanted quiet to write the plays that filled his mind, like the quiet he had enjoyed when he lived for a year on the palace grounds in a tiny cottage tucked away in a grove of pine trees. He chuckled to himself as he remembered the parties he had hosted there when he would stand up and tell outrageous stories to his guests, all witless themselves, come to revel in his wit, which flowed like the wine they drank.

The door opened, startling him. Sir Thomas Heneage stepped in. Sir Thomas was a big, ruddy-faced man of Oxford's age with a large head. He leaned forward over his spindly legs as if he was about to topple over frontwards. Some wag had described him as an ambling upended sitting room sofa, more bovine than bullish. Sir Thomas' wealth came from property he acquired by marrying a wealthy widow. He made another fortune by investing in the voyages of Sir Francis Drake, who returned with gold, while Oxford put himself in debt by financing the voyages of Martin Frobisher who returned with the horn of a unicorn, a few natives, and rocks that turned out to be worthless.

As if that wasn't enough, the queen had elevated Heneage to the rank of Vice Chamberlain and Treasurer of the Chamber, offices that gave him power over domestic and foreign affairs. He was a minor poet whose poetry looked and sounded like he did - plodding and top-heavy. This day, for some reason, he was dressed in a bright yellow doublet and purple hose, reinforcing the view of most of the courtiers that, if one of them could come up with a new way of looking elegant, Heneage would show up in an outfit that would redefine the word "inelegant."

"Ah, Oxford," Sir Thomas said. "How nice to see you."

"How dost thou, Sir Thomas."

"Well, thank you." Sir Thomas put a beefy hand on Oxford's shoulder. "The queen is in a good mood today, to the relief of all of

us. She's been much taken of late with the loss of Leicester, the old dog. You know he may have killed himself when his wife, unknowingly, maybe knowingly, gave him the very draught he had brought home to poison her?"

"Really," Oxford said, having already heard the story. It was not difficult to believe. Leicester's first wife, Amy Robstart, had been "found" years ago at the bottom of a staircase. Leicester thought this would free him to marry Elizabeth and become king in all but name. Elizabeth had flirted with the idea but the rumor that Amy had been pushed down the stairs would not go away. Elizabeth eventually made it clear that Leicester would not be marrying England's "Virgin Queen." The irony of Leicester being hung on his own petard while trying to poison his second wife was a pleasant thought, but Oxford suddenly realized a switched cup of poison might be something he could use in a play he was working on. He drifted away, thinking of various possibilities.

Sir Thomas thought Oxford had gone silent because he did not want to enjoy a quiet chortle over Leicester's fall. He adopted a more businesslike attitude. "In any event," he went on, taking his hand off Oxford's shoulder, "don't incite the old boot today. We have worked for days to make her smile. If you get into a row with her, she'll take it out on us once you're gone." Oxford's face showed surprise at this suggestion. "Don't give me that look. The two of you are so alike. We dread your visits. Fortunately, you haven't seen her for some time now."

Oxford gave Sir Thomas a thin smile. "I'll do my best."

"Good," said Sir Thomas, too self-absorbed to notice Oxford's sarcasm. "Let me take you to her."

"By all means."

The two of them went off down a long hall. Sir Thomas stopped at a plain door. Oxford opened it and stepped into a small room he recognized as the Summer Room. It was at the rear of the palace. The far wall was filled with large glass doors that looked out onto a park. The other three walls were covered with hangings imported from Belgium. The floor was freshly covered with rushes. A leather chair stood opposite the windows. Its back was straight and rose six feet from the floor. The arms were dark wood and bare. The wooden legs were straight and unornamented. A visitor might think it was a small throne, particularly when Elizabeth sat on it, but the chair's Spartan simplicity suggested that business was conducted in this room.

Elizabeth sat erect in the chair. She was wearing a silk robe over a black dress with a top made of white taffeta. Black taffeta backgrounded the robe and the dress. A simple chain suspended a silver cross above her breasts where the square-cut white top showed the fair skin for which she was famous. Her hair was piled on top of her head and held in place by an ivory comb that stood straight up at the back of her head.

Elizabeth was of middle height, slender, and straight. The bridge of her nose rose in the middle. Her forehead was large and fair. Her eyes were as gray as glass.

Oxford had not seen her in some time. She was now fifty-five. Despite the layers of makeup, her attempts to prove she was immune to the ravages of time were failing. Her aging face and thinning hair surprised him. The rich red hair he had held in his hands years earlier was now the color and texture of burnished straw.

A large arras covered the wall across from Oxford. It showed the death of Acteon, the hunter who had stumbled upon Diana bathing in a forest pool. Diana had changed Acteon into a stag for his effrontery and he was run down by his dogs who thought he was a deer. The weaver had skillfully caught the fright on Acteon's face as the dogs seize him by the throat. 'Don't cross Diana,' Oxford thought to himself as he looked at the wall hanging. What better sign to hang on the wall of a room in which Her Majesty dispensed justice? Or accepts gifts, such as the play he held under his arm and the perfume bottle he had pried from Signore Baldini's hands.

Three ladies-in-waiting stood against the wall to the left of the tapestry. Their low chatter stopped as Oxford stepped into the room and knelt on the rushes.

"Ah," the queen said. "My Lord of Oxford."

"Elizabeth . . ." he said, pausing just long enough to let everyone think he was greeting her by her Christian name. Such familiarity would have been unacceptable from any subject, even from a lord as senior as Oxford, but before the queen and her attendants could draw in their breath, Oxford followed 'Elizabeth' with 'Regina,' making it clear that he was addressing her in Latin.

The ladies-in-waiting relaxed. The queen did not: she knew he was punning on the word 'vagina,' for he had called her 'Regina Vagina' more than once when they had been lovers. She was not pleased.

The ladies-in-waiting, of course, had no idea that Oxford intended his greeting to refer to a very private part of the queen's anatomy, but they could tell they had missed something; the queen was suddenly

angry. They averted their eyes, expecting an outburst, but Elizabeth sat there, as still as an Egyptian statue, her hands gripping and ungripping the arms of her chair while she glared at Oxford, who kept his head down, awaiting her response. She wanted to strike him but realized that his outrageous statement was like a burst of fresh air from a window suddenly thrown open. Few knew of the promises they had exchanged years earlier and how duty had pried them apart, she on a course that would deny her a husband and he on a course that would send him back to his wife.

She looked down at his bowed head and marveled at how two words, one her name, the other her official title, separated by a pause and a pun, could bring back memories of a time when she could not get enough of him. Two simple words that sent a message only she would get. How much more economical could a wordsmith be, she wondered? He would, of course, deny anything untoward was intended if she were so witless as to ask. At the same time, "Regina," once it had delivered its hidden pun, immediately restored decorum to the room.

Elizabeth smiled slightly, a smile seen by the ladies in waiting who began to relax. Oxford saw it too but, while he saw the queen smile, her eyes told him he was to go no further.

"Welcome, cousin," Elizabeth said, gesturing with her long-fingered hands for Oxford to rise. "Do your words always carry double meanings, my lord?"

"Always, Your Majesty." He stood up.

"As they do now," she said, the faint smile still on her face, which, in the interest of resuming a more regal bearing, she was trying to erase.

"Your Majesty sees all," Oxford deadpanned.

"If I did, I would have no need of Walsingham's spies."

"Or Lord Burghley's."

"Yes."

"May I?" Oxford stepped forward with the pouch containing the bottle of perfume. He opened it and handed the bottle to her. The queen took out the porcelain vial and held it up. She loved gifts.

Oxford repeated Signore Baldini's explanation. "The essence of a desert bush from Morocco that blooms only once a year," he said, "and then only in moonlight." The queen opened the vial and inhaled the scent inside. Oxford continued. "Pried from the hand of a Spanish

captain found in the surf off Sligo Bay. A scent never before experienced outside of Africa."

"We like it," the queen said. "'Tis a fitting gift for one as you to give your queen." She put the vial back into the leather bag and handed it to one of the ladies in waiting who had silently appeared at her side.

"I am humbled," Oxford said, bowing. "I have come hither with great expectations to hear what Your Majesty wishes to command of me."

"Still seeking Harwich?" she asked sarcastically.

"I expect Your Majesty has something more important for me to do than oversee a small port at the mouth of the River Orwell."

"I do, but not a position of command, as you have pressed me for all these years."

He scowled. "I expect no favor in that regard, since you have never honored my requests for command."

"And for good reason," she said, her voice rising. "You see connections the rest of us don't see, and this allows you to write plays and poetry that we marvel at, but generals must deal with reality and make decisions. Seeing a thousand possibilities can cripple someone who has too much imagination."

"So, you seek out men who have little or no imagination" Oxford said, "like Hatton, a sheep without teeth."

"Yes. Better the 'mutton' who cannot bite than the 'boar' whose teeth can raze," she said, alluding to a letter Christopher Hatton had written her arguing that she should prefer him over Oxford for this very reason.

"But it is my duty to add to the luster of my forefathers," Oxford went on, trying to remain calm. "You have denied me that opportunity. You have denied me my heritage."

"I have denied you nothing. I sent you north to second Lord Sussex and you threw yourself at the Scots in such a reckless manner that you had to be rescued. England can ill afford to throw away another poet. I will not have another Sidney."

"Sidney! A little poet made great by an early death."

Elizabeth frowned. "Sir Philip lies not long in the ground, my lord."

"Yes, and none too soon. English poetry is the better without him."

"Jealousy ill becomes you, my lord."

"'Tis not jealousy, Your Majesty. Sidney's ideas would have crippled poetry. Accent and rhythm would have died away. Every poet alive should be grateful he is gone. God obviously called him home."

"A curious statement, coming from a man who has been linked to the devil in more ways than one. When were *you* last inside a church?"

"Last week," Oxford said. He looked away.

"St. Paul's, no doubt, to wander through the bookstalls there. Did you stay for the sermon?" She spied the papers under his arm. "And what else did you bring with you today?"

"A new play, Your Majesty, with scenes never seen anywhere, even in Africa."

"No." She waved a hand as if to dispel an odor that had suddenly filled the room. "We will have no more plays."

"No more plays? Plays are my life."

"Being the 17th Earl of Oxford is your life, my lord. The playhouse is for bawds. Let Lyly and Greene write plays; you must write poetry."

"Poetry cannot compare to plays."

"Poetry exceeds playwriting on every level. Look at *Astrophel and Stella,* Sidney's great poem."

"Sidney again! How many people have sat in rapt attention while they listened to *Astrophel and Stella*?"

Not at first sight, nor with a dribbled shot
Love gave the wound, which while I breathe will bleed.

Oxford snorted. The queen made no effort to stop him. She and the ladies in the room waited, knowing he could repeat anything he heard only once, no matter how long it was. Oxford, unaware that he had been ceded the floor, raced on:

But known worth did in time of mine proceed,
Till by degrees it had full conquest got;
I saw and liked, I liked but loved not.

"This is drivel!" he exclaimed, throwing up his hands. "*Love's 'dribbled shot?' 'At length to love's decree I, forced, agreed?'* 'Tis the forced gait of a shuffling nag! He was a facile poet, Your Majesty, imitative at best, sentimental and silly at worst. He could hiss like a serpent - *Sweet swelling lips well maist thou swell* - gobble like a turkey - *Moddels such be wood globes* - and quack like a duck - *But God wot, wot not what they mean.*"

He stood before her, hands on his hips. He could tell she was trying not to laugh.

"How much better this." He turned and struck a menacing pose: "Evil Richard sending Earl Rivers to his death:

> *Wilt thou be ringleader to wrong, must you guide the realm?*
> *Nay, overboard all such mates I hurl, whilst I do guide the helm.*
> *I'll weed you out by one and one, I'll burn you up like chaff;*
> *I'll rend your stock up by the roots.*

Oxford, now excited, went on. "Richard snarls and paces across the stage, a moving, breathing embodiment of everyone's fear - an evil king! A thousand pairs of eyes, nay three thousand, watch him plot and scheme, the illusion being more real than reality."

"Illusion?" Elizabeth snorted out. "Thou knowest nothing of illusion. You write a poor play and get hissed off the stage. I govern poorly and people rush in to send me after my father."

"True," Oxford agreed, loving the return to the way they had argued during their courtship, "but your words, severing me from my work, kill me as much as if you had cut my head off!"

This stopped the queen for a moment. Lips pursed, she looked away. Oxford thought she was wavering.

"I am filled with characters who rage for admission to the world. Generals order me to let them strut the stage; Machiavels push at me to work their wiles on gulls and fools; murderers clamor for attention so that they can poison good people and cry out when they are undone. I am bloated with a sickness that can only be cured by being bled through my pen, my blood, freighted with pirates and peasants, coursing down my arm to come out as stark scratchings that turn white pages into living, breathing art." His outburst had drained him. "I am touched with fire," he said in a subdued voice.

"Then you must douse it, my lord. Your sovereign commands it."

Oxford looked at her, anger supplanting the disappointment visible on his face. "For my queen?" he asked. "Or for someone else?" He walked over to the arras. He stopped and assumed a dramatic pose. "The people say that Lord Burghley doth age and his hearing fades. Thus, we must raise our voices so that he misses nothing!"

Unsheathing his rapier in one swift movement, he hooked the edge of the arras and flipped it aside, exposing an older man standing sideways in a doorway hidden by the hanging.

"Behold!" Oxford exclaimed. "My former father-in-law, a god these many years, listening to us like Zeus watching the Greeks and Trojans before Troy."

Burghley, his dignity ruffled, walked into the room. He was wearing a dark green coat, open down the front to expose the gold chain and symbol of his office as Lord Treasurer. He was white-headed and bearded but no one would mistake him for a king or general as he strode across the room to take up his position beside Elizabeth. Born William Cecil, son of a minor bureaucrat, he had been knighted by Elizabeth for his devotion to her during the years her brother and sister ruled England and Elizabeth waited to find out whether she would succeed her sister, Mary, or be executed as the bastard daughter of Anne Boleyn. In 1571, she made Cecil Baron Burghley so that his daughter could marry Oxford and his grandchildren could inherit Oxford's titles. Thus, in an odd twist, Burghley owed his rise to the peerage to Oxford. Of course, Pondus, as he was called behind his back because of his long speeches, had planned all this long before he had taken custody of twelve-year old Edward de Vere in 1562 when Oxford's father had suddenly and mysteriously died.

"So now we know why the queen doth command her most loyal subject to stop writing plays. Pondus must not let the playhouse taint his granddaughters before they are married off."

"The essence of civilized behavior," Burghley began, his nose in the air, "is the ability to enact gracefully and convincingly upon a public stage the role that fortune has selected for you. For Her Majesty, it is to be Queen of England. For me, it is to be Lord Treasurer. For you, it is to be …"

"Oh, shut it!" Oxford said.

Burghley stopped in mid-sentence, shocked.

The queen intervened.

"Let me read you something, Edward," she said, using his Christian name for the first time. She took out a small book and opened it to the title page. "*Il Cortegiano*," she said, "by a learned Italian gentleman named Baldassare Castiglione. A certain lord we know paid handsomely to have this work translated into Latin." She peered at him knowingly. "I believe it was your cousin, Arthur Golding, who translated it."

"My uncle," Oxford corrected her, "and it was Ovid's *Metamorphosis* he translated, not Castiglione."

"Yes," the queen went on smoothly, ignoring the double correction, "your mother's brother. Who was your tutor when you were young."

"As you are Tudoring me now," Oxford could not help himself from saying.

Burghley took this to mean that the queen was 'tutoring' Oxford, a pleasant thought to him. The queen knew Oxford had taken her family name and turned it into a verb. A smutty one at that. She forced herself to ignore it.

"A most gracious knight, Castiglione," she said, "and the finest defender of our courtly traditions."

"Yes, yes," Oxford said impatiently.

"You even wrote the preface, which Gabriel Harvey, of all people, said was a 'courtly epistle more polished than the writings of Castiglione himself.'"

Oxford knew what was coming. He felt like the patient watching a chirurgeon preparing his instruments to lance a boil.

"The preface most impressed me." She turned to a page near the front of the volume. Oxford had not seen the small book come into her hands.

The queen looked over the top of the book at him. "You admit, do you not, that Signore Castiglione propounded the very rules of proper behavior?"

Oxford nodded.

"And do you still find apt what *you* wrote in the preface? It's in choice Latin but let me see if I can translate it fairly." She held the book out in front of her:

> *And great as all these qualities are, our translator has wisely added one single surpassing title of distinction to recommend his work. For indeed what more effective action could he have taken to make his work fruitful of good results than to dedicate his Courtier to our most illustrious and noble Queen, in whom all courtly qualities are personified, together with those diviner and truly celestial virtues?*

She closed the book. "Do you know the last time I read this? When I read it to Sir Philip after you and he quarreled at the tennis court. I told Sir Philip then, as I am telling you now, that there are degrees between earls and gentlemen and that it is incumbent upon each to respect their superiors. Furthermore, princes must maintain the degrees descending between the people's licentiousness and the anointed sovereignty of the crown. The consequence of a gentleman's

neglect of nobility, in the former case being Sidney's disrespect of you, and in this case your refusal to accept my command that you leave playwriting to others, will result in the peasantry insulting us both."

"Yes, yes," Oxford said, impatiently. "The end of society as we know it because those who walk behind will kick the heels of those who walk in front."

The queen looked at him archly but wasn't quite sure whether he was being sarcastic.

"The heavens themselves," she continued, "observe degree, priority and place, proportion, season, form, office and custom, in all line of order," but Oxford interrupted her before she could go further.

"Your Majesty," Oxford pleaded, coming toward her, "all of that may be true, but do not take playwriting away from me."

"My lord, my court has need of poets, not playwrights."

"Quite so," Burghley murmured.

"Pondus, I am neither ward to you nor son-in-law. I am that I am, and I will serve myself first."

"Before you serve your queen?" Elizabeth asked.

"Madame, when your grandfather Henry Tudor took the crown from Richard, my forefathers lay fourteen-deep in the soil of England!"

Everyone in the room gasped.

"How dare you," Elizabeth said, her eyes flashing. "I am your sovereign queen, no matter how many of your ancestors preceded mine. You durst not speak thus to me."

"Or take liberties with the royal person," Oxford went on blithely, "as I was wont to do in times past."

"Stop!" Elizabeth shouted. She stood up. Her robe fell off her shoulders. It hit the floor before a lady-in-waiting could catch it. "Follow me," she said, striding past him toward the glass doors at the rear of the room. She flung them open and headed up the hill behind the palace in long angry strides. Oxford followed. When she arrived at the top, she pointed to a spot on the bench that circled the giant beech that crowned the hill. "Sit!" she commanded, treating him like a dog. He felt like one. He sat down. Once again, he had gone too far. She placed herself in front of him, her head back in anger, her hands on her hips.

"I may not be able to make the sun come up in the west but, by God, I can make any man a traitor. There are always Catholic plots

that need another conspirator. Wouldn't Lord Howard or Charles Arundel be happy to recount your Catholic leanings to pay you back for the months they spent in the Tower after you said they were conspiring to unseat me?"

"But I spoke the truth."

"Yes, but, if the investigation were reopened, would they not swear you told them that Joseph was a wittol, that Jesus was only a man, and Mary was a whore!?"

"Not true," Oxford protested weakly.

"No, true, my lord, and you know it. But even if not, such fine points will matter little once they are given an opportunity to testify against you."

Oxford looked up. He had angered her, yes, but so much that she would send him to the Tower again? She had become the commanding figure he had fallen in love with years earlier. Her age had disappeared.

She, however, was not playing the part of an old lover. She was furious at his insolence. Never far from thinking she was being laughed, she could not tolerate any sign of disrespect. Oxford's words, coming from a senior lord in open court, made the affront worse.

"Don't ever do that again," she said in a low voice.

He bowed his head.

She paced up and down in front of him, clenching and unclenching her fists, as if the sight of his face would cause her to strike him. Finally, she stopped pacing. A soft breeze fluttered a few leaves past them. Oxford thought they looked like silent servants trying to sweep something away. She sat down next to him.

"There are no keyholes up here to listen to what we say. You can lean on this tree or the flowers that fringe this retreat and they will not blab or tell someone what we speak. Not so elsewhere, where we must always keep an ear open, listening to footsteps in the hallway outside in the darkest part of night. Are they the measured pace of a guard walking by with even step, indifferent to the sound he makes, or are they the footsteps of someone trying to move swiftly to harm our person?"

She looked toward the river. A mile away a flower girl was walking down the road to the river to sell her flowers to passengers coming ashore. Elizabeth pointed toward her. "You see that girl? She dreams of being me. At times, I wish I could be her, but I cannot. I must be

Queen of England. I cannot gambol in flowered fields or loll in lover's arms. All that has been denied me."

"Not so," Oxford said quietly. "We exchanged rings and promises of eternal love. It was attested to by the holy close of lips and sealed by the archbishop at Croydon."

"A moment's lapse."

"Three or four weeks," Oxford lamented.

"We cannot change the roles that have been given us."

"You thought so once."

"I did, but in the coolness after so much heat I realized I would not be queen if you were consort."

"I would have been a star in your court."

"*I* would have been a star: *you* would have been the sun. We all know what happens when the sun comes out: the stars disappear."

The two of them sat there, staring out over the top of the palace at the river. A ship was moving downriver, the tops of its masts visible over the palace roof. Neither spoke. She touched his shoulder, surprising him.

"A touch," she said, "of something I can never have again."

She withdrew her hand. She rose from the bench.

"My marriage bed is England, and no sight of well-formed flesh shall sway me from what is good for England. I must be queen, and you must be my senior lord."

Oxford began to speak softly:

Being your slave, what should I do but tend
Upon the hours and times of your desire?
I have no precious time at all to spend,
Nor services to do, till you require.

Elizabeth waved a hand, telling him to stop. She knew the sonnet, one of many he had written to her. It threatened to take her back to times when she lay in his lap and let his poetry wash over her like the warm wind that was gently brushing her now.

Nor dare I chide the world-without-end hour
Whilst I, my sovereign, watch the clock for you,
Nor think the bitterness of absence sour
When you have bid your servant once adieu …

"Enough!" she said with just enough irritation to silence him. She turned away, looking down the hill toward the palace.

Oxford leaned toward her. "If you won't revisit those days with me, let me at least write plays. My loss, first of you, and now of playwriting, is a double loss I cannot bear. 'Tis the swirling height of mounting eagles when I write '*enter the young Prince, with Ned and Tom*,' book-ended by the tired pen of a spent lover when I close the tale with 'Finis.'" He waved the roll of papers he still held in his hand. "No simple poem this. No brief arrow shot into the sky, but textured stories no one has read or heard. I can no more resist their birth than the sun can stay its course at sunrise."

She said nothing. He thought she was softening.

"I saw the power of the stage at Cambridge when the students put on a play in front of you that was so anti-papist you stormed off, calling for the torches: 'Give me light: away!' you cried. 'Twas the moment I knew that poetry had been eclipsed. To write words that move one person while they read a poem is a wonderful thing; to write words that cause a sovereign to call for light and flee nothing more than actors on a stage is so much more."

He leaped up.

"What I will write will far exceed what Titian painted when I was in Venice, because a painting is dead as soon as the painter puts down his brush. A painting is like the stag's head over the fireplace at Hedingham, which is no longer alive. It's the same with poetry, dead as soon as the pen is lifted from the page, or sculpture, frozen the moment the sculptor puts down his chisel."

He swirled around.

"But what I will write will live every time one of my plays is staged! I will take the audience to Venice to watch pickpockets lifting purses from the gulls who walk the Grand Canal, or bring them into a throne room to watch the murder of a king. The audience will call for light, as you did, though the darkness be nothing more than the gossamer threads I have woven in my mind."

He looked intently at her.

"Do not take away my pen. Do not let Burghley silence me."

"I do not do this for Burghley," she said, a sharp edge back in her voice. "I do this because I will not allow the foremost noble in my realm to become a penny-a-page playwright, no matter how good his plays may be. And if they be more than good, the effect on my kingdom will be worse, since you, who should be first in upholding the noble character of my realm, will become known for the stories you write, and my reign will dissolve into nothing but contests over words and money. Nigh unto forty winters have creased thy brow, Edward;

far more mine. Death shall soon make us all kin - you, me, and the flower girl who now goes happily to the wharf below. I will not let you tarnish the nobility of my court by writing plays *and* stain your name at the same time."

"What name!" Oxford shouted, the anger he had been pushing down bursting out of him. He jumped up. "Had I writ, my name would have lived on in the mouths of men. 'Twas what Achilles feared: that he would do no deed worthy of being spoken of after he was gone. You force me to leave nothing behind me. My name will be buried where my body lies."

"Write poetry," Elizabeth said, resisting the urge to put her hand on his arm. "Honor my court with poetry, poetry only you can write."

He tore the papers in his hands into shreds and threw them away. They fluttered down the hill like birds scattered by the wind, hunting for a home they would never find. He refused to look at her. "I write none more," he said. He turned and set off down the hill.

It was an hour before she followed him. Burghley was waiting inside the door. "He would have made a terrible playwright," he sniffed. "I saw *Hamlet*. Too many tragical speeches."

"He would have made a *great* playwright," Elizabeth countered. "I have staunched someone that England has never seen, and may never see again."

"He must be an earl," Burghley intoned, "as you must be a virgin and bear no children."

She looked at him, making no effort to mask her disdain. "Thank you, my lord." She brushed past him into the palace.

~ 3 ~
The Boar's Head

Oxford saw no one on his way back through the palace, not even a Yeoman of the Guard. He waited for a boat to take him across the Thames to a world without honor or hope. "The sun will not show his head this day," he said, looking up at a sky that had turned gray and foreboding. "'*Framed in the front of forlorn hope, past all recovery, I stayless stand,*'" he began to recite, when a voice interrupted him.

"Your Grace?"

John the boatman was holding onto an iron ring below him. Oxford climbed down into the boat.

"Did ye give her my poem?" John asked.

Oxford felt for the poem but couldn't find it. He had lost it in the Palace. "Aye, John. But don't expect anything. Her mind is full of matters."

The sound of his voice cut him like a knife. It was a fitting end to a day of denigration and defeat: 'Forced to lie to an honest man, and an artist at that!' How far he had come from the boy who believed that his family's motto - *Vero nihil verius - Nothing truer than truth* - would be the pole star to guide him through his life.

"Then I rest content. Someone will surely read it."

"Aye," Oxford said. He looked away. The Thames, muddy and brown, roiled past them. He thought it looked like an oily beast, leering up at him as it surged by the boat.

They were quickly under the bridge. Boats crowded the landing like cattle pushing their way into a feed bin. Oxford stepped ashore. Tobias was nowhere to be seen. *And now?* he asked himself. His legs had gone numb. *Back to the Folly?* No. The papers that littered the rooms there would look like broken glass in an abandoned house, each page mocking his dream of being a playwright.

A woman carrying a tray of fish knocked into him as she went by. "Mind yer back, yer lordship!" she called out. The blow pushed him forward, away from the river. He headed uphill, his mind a blank. He turned left at Eastcheap. Moments later he found himself in front of the snarling boar's head that hung crookedly from a black iron frame

and told the world that the Boar's Head Tavern was inside. The front of the building leaned out over the street. Repaving and debris had raised the pavement over the years so that the entrance was below the street. Oxford stepped down and pushed open the wooden door.

The roar of voices, along with the aromas of trussed chickens, bacon fat, turtles in their shells, ducks, herons, and pheasants, welcomed him. Enormous posts held up the ceiling. They were covered with graffiti and papers announcing someone's latest literary effort. Knuckle bones paved the floor. Smoke from burning tobacco, a new vice introduced by Raleigh, filled the air. Trestle tables in the middle were filled with men playing games and arguing. Booths lined the walls.

Oxford wended his way through the smoke to the rear of the tavern and threw himself into a booth. He dumped his rapier and cape into a corner. A large man was sleeping on the other side of the table, a knee projecting above it like an uprooted tree. An immense belly rose and fell like an ocean being heaved by storms far away.

"Jack," Oxford hissed. The snoring continued. Oxford leaned over and twisted one of the man's fingers. The man snorted but did not raise his head. "Jack," Oxford repeated. "Wake up, ye fat slug!"

The man finally raised his head. He opened one eye. The eye smiled, if one eye could smile, but the face slept on. The eye slid shut like a window being slammed against a summer thunderstorm. The man called Jack slumped back under the table.

"Jack!" Oxford repeated, louder this time. He poked the man hard in the stomach, finally waking him. Jack sat upright, looking dazed. He was wide at the shoulders. An oversized head was crowned by a tangled lion's mane. His face wore the brown sheen of a ripe medlar. His shirt, expensive when new, was soiled and torn. An enormous buckle, tilted from the strain of holding in his large belly, held the ends of a leather belt. Soiled and tattered gaskins fell to his knees. A straw hat lay crushed on the seat next to him.

"My lord," the man called Jack said in a deep basso profundo. He reached out for a barmaid going by and reeled her in. "Peaches, my lass. Ale for his lordship and me."

The girl was plump and big-bosomed, with strawberry hair and the complexion of, indeed, a fresh peach. "Sir John Falstaff," she announced contemptuously, stepping back, "risen from the dead to eat and drink more. And all without paying."

"Peaches!" Jack protested. "I always pay. You know that!"

"Not in my lifetime. A large ale, my lord?"

Oxford nodded.

"Always large," Falstaff said, reaching for her again.

She twisted away. "For someone so large," she said, "I would not be jesting about size. Forget not the mouse that was et by the cat because he could not fit back in his hole."

"A mouse? I be a *lion* in this jungle."

Oxford lowered his head. Peaches and Falstaff saw his reaction and stopped their bantering. Peaches headed back to the kitchen.

Oxford looked at the big man across the table from him. Has he always been this fat? he wondered. They had first met at Cecil House when Oxford had been sent there as a royal ward. The boy earl had found Falstaff irresistible and they had become companions. Burghley was aghast when he found out. Dire consequences were predicted but here they were, years later, sitting opposite each other.

Oxford had a grim look on his face, which Falstaff recognized had nothing to do with his attempt at being witty. "So, what's more important than sleep?" he asked, trying to sound churlish, which he could not. He cocked an eye at Oxford

Oxford answered: "The queen says no to plays."

Falstaff was startled by this. "She's closing the playhouses?"

"No. She's ordered me to stop writing plays."

"Oh." Falstaff sat back. He began to stroke the end of one of his mustaches. There were two of them, one each side of his face. They grew larger as they spread out across his cheeks. He smiled confidently at Oxford. "Not to worry, my lord. Let her make her pronunciamentos. You shall go on as before and she will forget, as she has done in the past."

"Not this time, Jacko. This time she means it."

Falstaff demurred. "She won't be able to keep your plays off the stage. She loves them. And you."

Peaches returned with beer for both of them.

"*Did* love me."

"*Still* loves you," Falstaff insisted, "and your plays."

"She doesn't need me anymore. She has Marlowe and Kyd, and Greene and Lyly."

Falstaff snorted. "Those university boys have not the wit to write plays for her. She will tire of them. She will relent. *Je vouz assure.*"

"And what makes you so sure?" Oxford asked, wanting to believe him.

Falstaff placed a thick index finger alongside his nose. "I know because my nose tells me."

"Your nose?"

"My nose. *La Nez.*

"Le Nez," Oxford corrected him.

"Of course. *Le nez.* A mere slip of the tongue, a loose connection twixt my teeming brain and my addled tongue. How could my nose be anything but masculine?" He turned to show it in profile. "Don't the French consider it the marker of a man? François the First had *un grand nez.* They say the first part of him to arrive at an assignation was determined by the beauty of the lady he was approaching." Oxford frowned. He was in no mood for jokes. "In my case," Falstaff went on, "*my nose knows.*" A look of contentment came over him. "Oh, I am a poet after all."

"Three words do not make you a poet."

"Why not? Marlowe made you cry with scarce more." Falstaff placed his hand over his heart. "*Come live with me and be my love*," he proclaimed. Oxford started to argue, but a man in a nearby booth jumped up and began to speak.

"Learned gentlemen and friends," the man cried, placing his hand over his heart. Falstaff immediately snatched his away from his chest. "Let me fill your ears with poetry to titillate your fine senses."

The tavern quieted. Such outbursts were common. The speaker climbed onto a bench, his hand still pressed against his chest. His eyes were small, his mustache wispy, his accent provincial. His hair was brown and greasy and plastered to his head. His clothes were the weeds newcomers buy in Three Needle Street to make them think London would accept them as gentlemen:

A parliemente member, a justice of the peace,
At home a poor scare-crowe, at London an ass,
If lowsie is Lucy, as some folk miscall it,
Then Lucy is lousie whatever befall it.

The patrons started laughing. Sir Thomas Lucy was well-known, if not well-liked. The speaker continued:

He thinks himself great, yet an ass in his state,
We allow by his ears but with asses to mate.
If Lucy is lowsie as some folke miscall it,
Sing Lowsie Lucy whatever befall it!

Cheers rang out, but Oxford had heard enough. He walked over to the man, who was bowing to whistles and applause.

"They applaud your insolence and not your art," Oxford told him.

The man recognized Oxford. "My lord! I trust I do not offend."

"Only the gods of poetry. What work is this from?"

"A snippet of a larger work, my lord, *The Poacher of Arden Forest*."

"The queen deserves it."

"Thank you, my lord."

"No thanks are due." Oxford turned to the patrons in the tavern. "Who needs a university education when talent like this comes so naturally?" Oxford turned back to the man who was still standing on the bench. "You are gifted, young sir."

"Sweet words, coming from one whose plays rank in Heaven."

"Oh, they do rank, sir. They fester worse than weeds. What do you call yourself?"

"William Shackspear, my lord."

"Shack-Spear?"

The man did not hear the wonder in Oxford's question. He was still reveling in the euphoria of being praised by the Poet Earl. "I am from Stratford-upon-Avon, my lord. I may only be the son of a glover, but I have high aspirations. I just missed the fleet when it sailed."

"How unfortunate. You could have served with us on the *Bonaventure*."

"Indeed," Shackspear went on, warming to their conversation. He climbed down and assumed a dramatic pose. "Now I shall be Aeschylus to commemorate our great victory. And my name shall live on forever, so long as men live and breathe!"

"Really. And how came you to this lofty profession?"

"Your plays, my lord! I heard *Hamnet* in Stratford! I was swept away on a river of words! I even named my son after your play," he said, thinking this detail would cement their relationship.

"Hamnet?" Oxford asked incredulously. "The play is called *Hamlet*, my dear man, not *Hamnet*!"

"It is?" Shackspear's face fell. He suddenly looked cross-eyed. "I saw it at the Guild Hall. It was difficult to hear. I thought the name was Hamnet. Nothing was printed, of course," he babbled on, frightened that his good fortune was now washing away because he had misheard one letter in a name. "Oh, well, Hamnet or Hamlet.

What difference does a letter make?" he asked, his voice now carrying a tone of false light-heartedness. "You still have your play, and I still have my son." He looked as if this fixed all.

Oxford's face was frozen in disbelief. "Yes," he finally forced himself to say. "And I'm sure he's a fine lad. But Aeschylus actually *fought* at Marathon. You missed the fleet, so you cannot be Aeschylus. Homer is a better choice. He was not at Troy. Call yourself Homer, young man. You shall be England's Bard."

"Oh, thank you, my lord," Shackspear gushed. "Thank you."

Oxford turned and headed for the door. Falstaff followed.

"Hamnet!" Oxford muttered to himself as they crossed the room.

"Son of a glover," Falstaff said, repeating Shackspear's phrase.

"Do you think he's related to you?" Oxford asked.

"To me?"

"Shack-Spear. Fall-Staff. Spear. Staff."

Falstaff's face darkened. "That pizzle-pup is no relation to me, my lord. Thou hast a way of offending with words, my lord, words that 'spear' people, if I may say so. Cast them not at me."

They were at the door which suddenly opened to reveal a young man in the livery of a page. "My lord," the young man said, bowing to Oxford. "My Lady Mary, Countess of Pembroke, requests your presence tomorrow at 11 o'clock. She is staying at Cecil House."

"I shall be there."

"My lord," Peaches said from behind them. She had Oxford's sword and cloak in her arms. "You shouldn't leave without these."

"Thank you, Peaches. Yes, Nigel would leave my service if I had returned without these. You are too kind to keep looking after me."

"And me," Falstaff added, a twinkle in his eye.

"Ye fat chuff," Peaches said. "Off with ye!"

"I'm making progress, I am," Falstaff said to Oxford's backside as they climbed the steps to the street. "Last time she called me a stinking sack of Sheffield …"

Lineage Tables

(at end of text)

The Earls of Oxford

William Cecil

Baron Burghley

The Earls of Southampton

The Earls of Derby

Peregrine Bertie, Lord Willoughby de Eresby

The Earls of Pembroke

The Lords Hunsdon

The Sidney Family

The Earls of Oxford

John de Vere, 16th Earl of Oxford (d. August 3, 1562)

(m. 1536)

Dorothy Neville (died Aug 3, 1562)

Katherine —— m. ——Edward, Baron Windsor,
(b. 1538; d. 1600) (b. 1532; d. 1575)[1]

(m. 1549)

Margery Golding - m. - Charles Tyrell (1563)
(Margery d. 1568) (Tyrell d. 1570)

Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford Mary - m. - Peregrine Bertie[2]
(b. April 12, 1550; d. June 24, 1604)

Anne Cecil
(daughter of Lord Burghley)[3]
(m. Dec 1571; d. June 5, 1588)

Queen Elizabeth . . .
(affair 1573)

Earl of Southampton
(b. 1573; d. 1624)[5]

Anne Vavasor . . . . .
(affair 1580-1581)

Edward Vere
(b. March 1581;
d. 1629 without issue)

Elizabeth Trentham
(m. 1592; d. 1609)

Henry de Vere, 18th Earl of Oxford
(b. Feb 24, 1593; d. 1625 without issue)

Elizabeth - m. - Wm Stanley, Earl of Derby [4]
(b. 7-2-1575)

Son – (died soon after birth)
(b. 1583)

Bridget - m. - Francis Norris, Baron of Rycote
(b. 4-6-1584)

Susan - m. - Philip Herbert, Earl of
(b. 5-26-1586) Montgomery[6]

Frances – (died soon after birth)
(b. 1587)

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[1] Edward, Baron Windsor, died, January 24, 1574, in Venice. Oxford's half-sister, Katherine, wife of Edward, Baron Windsor, sued Oxford in 1563 to have their father's marriage to Oxford's mother declared void, which would have 'unearled' Oxford. He was 14 years of age at the time and subject only to the Court of Wards. Katherine's suite was dismissed. She apparently did not refile in the Court of Wards, probably because its head was Sir William Cecil, soon to become Baron Burghley, and Oxford's guardian.

[2] *See,* Peregrine Bertie

[3] *See,* The Family of William Cecil, Baron Burghley

[4] *See,* The Earls of Derby

[5] *See,* The Earls of Southampton

[6] *See,* The Earls of Pembroke