1 BLACK SCREEN

TITLES BEGIN over the SOUNDS of city traffic.

FADE UP:

2 EXT. THEATER DISTRICT OF BROADWAY - DUSK

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

SIDE ALLEY

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

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

3 INT. BROADWAY THEATER - BACKSTAGE - DUSK

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

TITLES CONTINUE.

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

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

Stagehands are moving stage lights as--

A STAGE MANAGER

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

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

The curtains start to OPEN and the MURMUR of the audience dies down.
INT. BROADWAY THEATER - THE STAGE - CONTINUOUS

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

"Prologue" regards his audience for a beat before:

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

OFF STAGE

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

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

ON STAGE

"Prologue" opens his umbrella.

PROLOGUE (CONT’D)
He died at the age of 56, and was survived by his wife and two daughters who were, like Shakespeare’s own father, irrefutably illiterate.
OFF STAGE

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

PROLOGUE (O.C.) (CONT’D)
His will famously left his second best bed to his widow. But it made no mention of a single book or manuscript.

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

ON STAGE

“Prologue” continues, as do TITLES.

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

(lets that sink in, then)
Our Shakespeare is a cypher, a ghost; his biography made not by history... but by conjecture. His story not written with facts, but with...

imagination.

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

PROLOGUE (CONT’D)
(more energetic)
So! Let me offer you a different story. A darker story... Of quills and swords. Of power and betrayal. Of a stage conquered, and a throne lost!

A FLASH OF LIGHTNING, and for a moment only sheets of RAIN are visible. No stage, no “Prologue”. Then, through the rain, we see a form of a man... Ben Jonson... running. Then we make out the shapes of houses... a street. We’re not on a stage anymore. We are:
EXT. BANKSIDE LONDON - 1604 NIGHT

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

He frantically opens the wooden door to the theater--

INT. THE ROSE THEATER - NIGHT

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

EXT. THE ROSE THEATER - CONTINUOUS

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

POLE
Break it down!

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

POLE (CONT'D)
Again!

INT. THE ROSE THEATER - CONTINUOUS

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

EXT/INT. THE ROSE THEATER - CONTINUOUS

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

POLE
Jonson! Jonson!! Show yourself!

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

JONSON

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

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

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

Nothing. A beat, then--

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

The soldier hesitates.

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

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

JONSON

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

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

FLAMES

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

A TRAP DOOR

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

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

Ballocks!

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

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

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

INSERT

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

BACK TO SCENE

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

THE THEATER

Timbers CRASH and fireworks EXPLODE over the theater.

EXT. THE THAMES RIVER - DAWN

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

INT. TOWER OF LONDON - AN INTERROGATION ROOM - DAWN

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

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

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

Jonson nods.

INTERROGATOR (CONT’D)
And have you ever been arrested before, Mr. Jonson?

JONSON
I’m a writer, aren’t I? Of course I’ve bloody well been--
And a guard BACKHANDS Jonson on the face full force—hard enough to send Jonson and the chair to the ground. His nose starts to bleed.

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

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

FIGURE
Ask him about the plays.

JONSON
(to the Interrogator)
Plays?
(to the Figure)
Which would you prefer, my lord? A pastoral? An historical? An historical-pastoral, or an hysterical historical pastoral--

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

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

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

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

And SMACK--

FLASH CUT TO:

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

BACK IN THE CELL
Jonson blinks, trying to stay conscious. His mouth is ripped, bleeding. So is his nose.
The skin has broken on his forehead. The Interrogator leans into the bloody Jonson.

INTERROGATOR
Where are the plays?

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

CUT TO:

MORE FACES
Laughing. We are:

14 INT. THE ROSE THEATER - DAY
And it is nine years earlier. The faces come from an audience watching a play. They find the performance hysterical.

15 EXT. ROSE THEATER/BANKSIDE LONDON - CONTINUOUS

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

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

SOUTHAMPTON (O.S.)
Well?

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

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

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

OXFORD
(frowning slightly)
Well, it’s certainly... big.
SOUTHAMPTON
I promise you, Edward, you’ve seen
nothing like it before! Nothing!

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

SOUTHAMPTON
(teasing)
You’re an elitist, you know that,
Edward?

Oxford pauses at the entrance.

OXFORD
There won’t be puppets, will there?

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

USHER
My lords...

INT. THE ENTRY OF THE ROSE THEATER – CONTINUOUS

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

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

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

SELLING-MAID
Ale? Mutton, mi’ lord?

Southampton waves her off as they follow the usher up
another flight of stairs.
SOUTHAMPTON
...and last week, they had some sort of a device to hoist cherubs into the air and fly over the entire audience!

OXFORD

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

OXFORD (CONT’D)
Whenever the Greeks wrote their heroes into a situation from which they couldn’t write their way out--

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

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

Oxford continues up, two steps behind Southampton.

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

FROM OXFORD’S POV
Audience members LAUGHING-- others DRINKING-- maids SELLING food-- the actors ACTING...

It’s alive. Magical.

BACK TO OXFORD
Oxford takes it all in, almost stunned by it.

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

Another actor SPENCER (30) plays “FASTIDIOUS”; a pompous, over-dressed, caricature of a nobleman.
He wears an enormous feather on his hat. Also on stage is an actor called John HEMINGE (late 40's), who plays "Sogliardo"

SHAKESPEARE
And whither were you riding now, signior?

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

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

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

BACKSTAGE

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

IN THE RAISED SEATING

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

They are called the “Mermaid’s Wits” because they frequent a pub named The Mermaid’s Tavern.

NASHE
(takes a swig of ale)
His second play, and almost a full house.
(burps)
He’s got a wit, does Jonson.

MARLOWE
That might be so, but like a grain of wheat hid in a bushel of chaff: you shall seek all day ere you find it, and when you have it, it’s not worth the search!
The others smile as a woman passes.

WOMAN
Ale! Ale!!

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

MARLOWE
(retrieving coins)
That would be because no one saw "Shoemaker's Holiday".

DEKKER
Ale here!

Marlowe gives the woman a few pennies as--

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

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

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

Nashe squints.

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

DEKKER
I wonder if he needs any material?

MARLOWE
Certainly not any of yours.

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

Shakespeare points to “Fastidious”.

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

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

SHAKESPEARE (CONT’D)
He sleeps with a musk-cat every night, and walks all day hang’d in perfumed chains for penance.

A GROUNDLING
Oi! So that’s what I been smelling!

More groundlings laugh. Interestingly--

NOBLEMEN
in the box seats do not.

ON STAGE

Shakespeare continues his rant, speaking directly to the groundlings.

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

As the audience HOWLS in laughter, we see:

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

ON STAGE

Shakespeare smiles triumphanty.
SHAKESPEARE (CONT’D)
He is a good and empty puff, but he
loves you well, signior. I wish you
well with him.

OXFORD

Watches the nobleman with the big feathered hat pass by.

BACKSTAGE

Later in the play...

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

SHAKESPEARE (CONT’D)
Jonson! Wonderful dialogue!
Wonderful. I hope your next--

HENSLOWE (O.C.)
Will! Will Shakespeare!

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

HENSLOWE (CONT’D)
That’s not ale in that goblet is it?

Shakespeare hides the goblet behind his back.

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

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

IN THE THEATER

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

SIR RICHARD POLE, THE CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD

--jumps on stage.
POLE
This play has been declared seditious and illegal by Lord William Cecil!

The audience begins to BOO at the mention of Cecil.

POLE (CONT’D)
All are herewith ordered to disperse immediately!

A GROUNDLING
Why don’t you disperse William Cecil’s arse!

POLE
Arrest that man!

IN OXFORD’S BOX

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

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

SOUTHAMPTON (CONT’D)
Edward?

Oxford turns to him, distracted, and nods.

ON STAGE

Jonson pushes his way on stage.

JONSON
(to Pole)
Seditious? Seditious?! It’s a comedy for god’s sake! There’s nothing seditious about--

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

JONSON
Because I wrote the bloody thing! And--

POLE
Arrest him as well!

Jonson is grabbed by guards.
INT. A JAIL CELL - DAY

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

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

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

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

CUT TO:

INT. TENNIS COURT AT ESSEX HOUSE - DAY

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

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

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

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

OXFORD
Out!

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

OXFORD (CONT’D)
(to Southampton)
Henry, how many people were at that play?
Southampton pauses before serving.

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

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

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

SOUTHAMPTON
Five or six I suppose.

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

ESSEX
By the--!

OXFORD
(to Essex)
So! Ten thousand souls. All listening to the writings of one man—the ideas of one man. That’s power, Robert. And if there is one thing the Cecils understand, it’s power.

ESSEX
(snorts)
And when did words ever win a kingdom? I think I’ll keep my sword, thank you very much.

Southampton SERVES as Oxford smiles at Essex’s naiveté.

19 INT. CHANGING ROOMS/ESSEX HOUSE – DAY 19

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

ESSEX
(to the valets)
Leave us.

(two valets exit)

Henry... Some of my men have... intercepted... some of William Cecil’s recent correspondence with King James of Scotland...
Southampton pauses in clothing himself. This is serious.

ESSEX (CONT’D)
Cecil’s all but promising him the throne...

SOUTHAMPTON
To James? Elizabeth would never agree to—

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

SOUTHAMPTON
But a Scotsman? On the Tudor throne?

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

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

WIDER

ESSEX (CONT’D)
Think, Henry, if James owes Cecil his throne, Cecil will have more influence in the next reign than he does in this one. And after William Cecil, his hunch-backed son will take his place...
(careful)
That is why we must do everything in our power to ensure that the right man succeeds her.
(beat)
A man deserving of the Tudor crown.

Southampton stiffens at that last phrase.

ESSEX (CONT’D)
I ask you for the support of you and your men, Henry.... if it comes to a fight.
Southampton looks at Essex hard.

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

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

WHERE OXFORD WAS STANDING
Nothing. He is gone.

BACK TO SOUTHAMPTON AND ESSEX
They exchange a slightly worried look.

CUT TO:

EXT. ESSEX HOUSE - DAY

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

OXFORD
Essex played rather poorly, didn’t he?

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

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

Southampton pauses, confused for an instant, then--

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

Oxford nods.

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

They keep walking towards Southampton’s men.

SOUTHAMPTON (CONT’D)
And what would you have me do?
OXFORD
I would have you deny him.

SOUTHAMPTON
The son of the Queen?

OXFORD
That is rumor only, Henry--

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

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

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

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

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

And then he feels instantly ashamed of having said that.

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

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

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

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

21 EXT. CECIL HOUSE - SUNSET

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

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

22 INT. CECIL HOUSE - GREAT HALL - DUSK

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

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

A HUNCH-BACKED MAN

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

He pauses near Southampton.

SOUTHAMPTON

Sir Robert.

ROBERT CECIL

My lord of Southampton. (looking around)
Have you seen Essex?

SOUTHAMPTON

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

ROBERT CECIL

(sharp, annoyed)

Alone?
SOUTHAMPTON

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

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

A FOOTMAN clears his throat and--

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

DOUBLE DOORS

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

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

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

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

Essex ignores Cecil’s glare, notices Southampton--

ESSEX
(to Elizabeth)
Ah-- Majesty, I’ve been told my lord of Southampton has a gift for you.

ELIZABETH
(eyes sparkle)
A gift?

SOUTHAMPTON
Yes, your grace, though not from me.

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

A DWARF enters, followed by dancing faires, actors swirling sparklers, and musicians playing music.
Elizabeth’s rheumy eyes widen in complete delight, a smile of total jubilation crosses her face.

Robert Cecil, on the other hand, looks horrified.

ELIZABETH
Are you this gift, my precious little man?

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

ELIZABETH
A play?

The dwarf bows his assent.

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

ESSEX
(interrupting)
--Will gladly accept your gift.

Robert Cecil turns to Essex, shocked.

ESSEX (CONT’D)
(to Elizabeth)
Of course that is if you so desire, majesty.

(to Robert Cecil)
The choice is her majesty’s to make, not yours. Is that not so Sir Robert?

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

ELIZABETH
(to the dwarf)
Comedy? Or tragedy?

DWARF
Comedy, majesty.

ELIZABETH
(delighted)
A comedy!

(MORE)
ELIZABETH (CONT’D)
(beat)
By whom?

DWARF
By... Anonymous, your majesty...

ELIZABETH
Anonymous...?
(then)
Oh, but I do so admire his verse...

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

ELIZABETH (CONT’D)
Lead us to this gift.

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

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

"QUINCE" (O.S.)
Bless thee, Bottom! Bless thee! Thou art translated!

CUT TO:

EXT. THE GROUNDS AT CECIL HOUSE - NIGHT

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

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

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

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

“BOTTOM” (CONT’D)
I will walk up and down here, and I will sing, that they shall hear I am not afraid.

BACKSTAGE

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

ON STAGE

“BOTTOM” (CONT’D)
(sings)
The ousel cock so black of hue,
With orange-tawny bill,
The throstle with his note so true,
The wren with little quill--

Titania awakens in her nest-like bed of fur.

“TITANIA”
What angel wakes me from my flow’ry bed?

ELIZABETH

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

OXFORD

watches, delighted by her reaction.

FROM HIS POV

We see Elizabeth watching. But it is an Elizabeth only 26 years old (referred to as YOUNG ELIZABETH in this script). We HEAR the sound of other dialogue, but from the same play. We are:
Thirty-eight years earlier. And YOUNG ELIZABETH watches
an earlier, slightly less sophisticated staging of “A
Midsummer Night’s Dream” (the costumes and sets are a
bit more thrown together).

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

FROM BACKSTAGE

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

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

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

ON STAGE

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

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

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

A STERN LOOKING MAN

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

"PUCK" (CONT’D)

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

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

YOUNG ELIZABETH

Lovely. Lovely!

CUT TO:

INT. HEDINGHAM CASTLE - KITCHEN - LATER

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

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

YOUNG ELIZABETH (O.S.)

Ah! There he is.

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

Boy Oxford bows deeply.

YOUNG ELIZABETH (CONT’D)

(to Boy Oxford)

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

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

BOY OXFORD

I did indeed, your majesty.

YOUNG ELIZABETH

You sport with me.

(smiling)

Compose something.

BOY OXFORD

Now?
YOUNG ELIZABETH

Yes. Now.

BOY OXFORD

On what subject, your grace?

She thinks. Then--

YOUNG ELIZABETH

(smiles)

Truth...

BOY OXFORD

(thinks, then--)

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

Though... never so old...

and time cannot make that false,

which once was true.

She smiles, claps.

YOUNG ELIZABETH

(to John de Vere)

My lord of Oxford. It seems you have

added a poet to your family’s long

line of warriors.

BOY OXFORD

Madam, I am as accomplished with the

sword and the musket as I am with

verse.

YOUNG ELIZABETH

(amused)

Are you indeed?

BOY OXFORD

(nods seriously)

It is my only desire to one day be

your majesty’s most trusted servant in

matters both of war and state, if you

will but have me.

YOUNG ELIZABETH

(charmed)

Why, Lord Cecil, it seems we may very

well have found your replacement.

WILLIAM CECIL

We hope not too soon, majesty, we hope

not too soon.
YOUNG ELIZABETH
(teasing)
And how liked you our young lord’s play, William?

William Cecil stiffens in discomfort.

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

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

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

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

Elizabeth notices.

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

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

CUT TO:

INT. A JAIL CELL - DAY

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

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

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

GUARD (CONT’D)
You’ve been released.

Jonson looks at it, confused.
GUARD (CONT'D)
Got powerful friends, now, don’t you?

26A  EXT. A BOAT - RIVER THAMES - DAY  26A

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

The City of London is far in the distance.

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

    JONSON
    And who are you?

Francesco just stares back.

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

Francesco is silent.

WIDER

The boat approaches a large stone house, Oxford Stone.

    CUT TO:

A RED ROSE

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

27  EXT. OXFORD STONE - GARDEN - DAY  27

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

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

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

    JONSON
    My lord...
OXFORD
The Tudor rose. The most beautiful of flowers, don’t you think?

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

OXFORD
So it does. So it does.

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

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

Jonson doesn’t know who he is talking about.

OXFORD (CONT’D)
Lord William Cecil. I have the questionable distinction of being married to his only daughter.

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

OXFORD (CONT’D)
It did, however, serve as helpful when I wrote to your jailers to release you in my father-in-law’s name.

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

JONSON
(in a panicked whisper)
My lord-- I’m sorry, does that mean my release is not officially sanctioned?

OXFORD
Don’t be an idiot Jonson, of course it wasn’t.
(beat)
But you are free, are you not?

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

Oxford turns to Jonson.

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

JONSON
Thank you, my lord.

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

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

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

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

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

OXFORD (CONT’D)
(nods)
Francesco.

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

JONSON
A play, my lord?

OXFORD
One you shall stage Bankside.

JONSON
Stage?
OXFORD
Under your name.

JONSON
My name, my lord?

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

Jonson tries not to be offended.

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

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

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

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

JONSON
All of them?

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

Jonson pales. This is a disaster for him.

OXFORD (CONT’D)
I wish you god speed and good morrow.

Jonson looks down at the manuscript, reads a few lines.
JONSON
My lord-- I really--

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

JONSON (CONT’D)
My lord?

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

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

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

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

JONSON
Hello? My lord?! I--

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

EXT. CECIL HOUSE - DAY

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

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

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

WILLIAM CECIL (CONT’D)
Don’t think because I was in London, I didn’t know exactly what went on here in my absence.
ROBERT CECIL
He is an Earl, father. I cannot deny him--

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

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

INT. CECIL HOUSE – HALLWAY – DAY

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

WILLIAM CECIL
Now tell me about the play.

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

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

WILLIAM CECIL
Of course he did.

(concerned)
But what was it about?

ROBERT CECIL
About? Some nonsense about fairies and cherubs.

WILLIAM CECIL
...And dancing asses?

Robert looks surprised at his father who has stopped suddenly.

WILLIAM CECIL (CONT’D)
(realizing, to himself)
Edward...

(to Robert Cecil)
Have you any idea what you have-- No, how could you...
And he starts back up the stairs.

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

    WILLIAM CECIL
    And do you know how long it took me to banish them from her presence? She adores them! Adores them! And Edward knows it.
    (beat)
    Mark my words, Robert, he has done this for a purpose.

    ROBERT CECIL
    Purpose? What purpose?

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

And with that he slams the door shut.

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

    CUT TO:

31 OMIT

THROUGH A THIRD STORY WINDOW

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

    WILLIAM CECIL (O.S)
    Robert.

32 INT. CECIL HOUSE - HALLWAY - DAY

And it is thirty years earlier.

BOY ROBERT CECIL (now 9) is staring out of the window. His back must have been deformed either in utero or at birth, because even now he is hunchbacked.
Finally Boy Robert Cecil turns and sees Young Oxford (now 17) entering the hallway with William Cecil and his wife and daughter, Young ANNE (15). In front of them, lined up, are several men whom we will learn are TUTORS.

Boy Robert Cecil doesn’t move.

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

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

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

Young Anne curtsies.

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

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

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

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

Why?

BOY ROBERT CECIL  

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

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

(Indicates one of them)

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

YOUNG OXFORD

Monsieur. Ca me fait plaisir de vous connaitre.

Master Crane bows his head.

WILLIAM CECIL

Nine to ten is Greek with Mister Simmons.

YOUNG OXFORD

(in Greek)

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

BOY ROBERT CECIL

Is that Homer?

YOUNG OXFORD

(sharp)

No. Plato.

Boy Robert frowns at the correction.

WILLIAM CECIL

(slight frown, then)

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

YOUNG OXFORD

(in Latin)

Continetne, ut spero, Ovidii Metamorphose? Mihi honori erit, patru

Mister Golding bows his head in appreciation.

WILLIAM CECIL

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

William Cecil seems to have finished.
YOUNG OXFORD
(to William Cecil)
And composition? Poetry?

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

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

WILLIAM CECIL
Not in this household.

INT. CECIL HOUSE - GREAT HALL - DAY
Young Oxford is fencing with a tutor. He’s quite good. In fact, he’s better than the tutor, who is twice his age.

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

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

THE CHESS BOARD
making the pieces scatter.

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

YOUNG OXFORD
You were losing anyway.

BOY ROBERT CECIL
I was also winning.

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

BOY ROBERT CECIL
(CONT’D)
You know I am going to one day succeed my father at the Queen’s side. Not you.
Young Oxford motions to go, then picks up the black king, and tosses it to Boy Robert Cecil, who can't catch it because of his deformity. It CLANGS on the floor.

YOUNG OXFORD

Really?

INT. CECIL HOUSE - HALLWAY - DAY

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

CUT TO:

POEMS

neatly written on parchment. We are:

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

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

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

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

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

WRITING DESK

where the parchments are scattered.

YOUNG OXFORD

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

UNDER THE TAPESTRY

Two feet.
WIDER

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

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

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

INT. THE ROSE THEATER - BACKSTAGE - DAY

Thirty-three years later.

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

BACKSTAGE

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

    SHAKESPEARE
    Is it any good?

    JONSON
    How in blazes should I know?

    SHAKESPEARE
    You haven’t even read it?

And Shakespeare is drawn back--

ON STAGE

--where he bows again, then steps--

BACKSTAGE

--so Jonson can answer him.

    JONSON
    I read a line or two-- I promised Henslowe I’d finish “Eastward Ho” by Saturday.

    SHAKESPEARE
    And you say he’s a nobleman?

Jonson doesn’t answer.
SHAKESPEARE (CONT’D)
Powerful? Rich??

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

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

And Shakespeare goes back on stage.

37
EXT. BANKSIDE LONDON - DAY

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

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

SHAKESPEARE
(amused)
Change the world? With rhyme?

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

Shakespeare laughs at him.

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

38
INT. THE MERMAID’S TAVERN - NIGHT

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

SHAKESPEARE
You know, it’s actually not half bad...
Jonson takes a swig of ale, then--

JONSON
Not half--?! You’re an actor, what in
God’s name do you know about writing?!
He’s an amateur, Will, a complete and
utter amateur. Last week gardening,
this week playwrighting, next week
hawking.
(takes another swig)
No. I won’t do it. It would be an
affront against the Muses...

SHAKESPEARE
(smiles)
Well we musn’t offend the muses,
whatever we do.
(thinks, then)
How much money did you say he gave
you?

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

Shakespeare smiles enigmatically.

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

Jonson frowns, confused as we--

CUT TO:

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

INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - OLD ELIZABETH’S BEDROOM - DAY

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

WILLIAM CECIL (O.S.)
King Philip of Spain sees the current
Catholic revolt in Ireland as a
weakness of ours. A weakness to be
exploited....
Elizabeth’s wig is being glued into place.

ELIZABETH
Ireland?

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

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

WILLIAM CECIL
There are rumors of his sending financial aid, and even troops. We must act quickly.
(beat)
We must replace the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, and send additional troops immediately, majesty.

ELIZABETH
Replace? With whom?

William Cecil hesitates slightly, then--

WILLIAM CECIL
I would recommend the Earl of Essex, your majesty.

ELIZABETH
Essex? To Ireland?
(frowns)
For how long?

WILLIAM CECIL
As long as the present crisis warrants, majesty.

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

Not what William Cecil wanted to hear.

WILLIAM CECIL
I only recommend we send your most able subjects where they are most needed, majesty.
(beat, a last-ditch effort)
Philip of Spain dreams still of taking your kingdom from you.
(MORE)
Of burning you at the stake as a heretic. Give him a foot-hold in Ireland, and--

ELIZABETH

But Essex?

WILLIAM CECIL

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

(clears his throat)

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

ELIZABETH

And who would you advise to replace him?

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

WILLIAM CECIL

Sir Robert Cecil.

ELIZABETH

Your son?

WILLIAM CECIL

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

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

ELIZABETH

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

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

ELIZABETH (CONT’D)

I saw a play this last weekend, William. It made me think of... days long past. Of memories... long past. Long past. I should like to see more of them... Has Edward been happy, William? With your daughter?
William Cecil doesn’t answer. Instead he thinks, remembers, as we hear his younger voice...

WILLIAM CECIL (O.S.)
Murdered!

CUT TO:

INT. CECIL HOUSE - GREAT HALL - DAY

Thirty years earlier.

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

WILLIAM CECIL
By your own hand!

YOUNG OXFORD
He was stealing my poems.

WILLIAM CECIL
He was doing my bidding!

YOUNG OXFORD
Yours?

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

YOUNG OXFORD
Robert? Robert told--

William Cecil SLAMS his fists on a table.

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

YOUNG OXFORD
My poems are my soul!

William Cecil turns away in frustration as much as disgust.

WILLIAM CECIL
You have placed me in a grave position, Edward.  
(MORE)
I cannot have my reputation soiled by this regrettable lack of control on your part... No. I will not have it. We can claim self-defense, he drew sword first.  
(beat)
But... I wish something in return.

Young Oxford looks worried.

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

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

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

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

William Cecil studies Young Oxford’s face.

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

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

INT. WESTMINSTER ABBEY - DAY

And Young Oxford and Anne are being married by a bishop.
BISHOP
...and in the fear of god, duly considering the causes for which matrimony was ordained. One was the procreation of children...

WILLIAM CECIL

appears triumphant. He looks beaming over to...

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

YOUNG ELIZABETH

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

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

AT THE ALTAR

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

INT. THE ROSE THEATER - DAY

Thirty-two years later.

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

IN OXFORD’S BOX

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

IN THE GALLERIES

Marlowe, Dekker and Nashe are looking at their single-sheet programs.
NASHE
“Henry V” by... No one?

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

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

MARLOWE (CONT’D)
Or will we be seeing a most hysterical historical?

Jonson sits next to Marlowe.

MARLOWE (CONT’D)
Hmm? Ben? Waiting to see how it’s received before you lay claim??

Before Jonson can answer--

ON STAGE
An actor, CONDELL (40’s), dressed all in white (even his face is painted white) enters stage. He is “Prologue”. He addresses the audience directly.

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

IN THE GALLERIES
Jonson seems surprised. This is not what he expected. This is good.

CUT TO:

HORSE HOOVES
as they POUND on cobblestone. We are:
EXT. THE ENGLISH COUNTRY-SIDE - DAY

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

INT. THE ROSE THEATER - DAY

It is later in the play.

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

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

IN THE GALLERIES

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

IN OXFORD’S BOX

Oxford watches, loving the stagecraft involved in the production.

"HENRY V" (CONT’D)
He that shall see this day and live t’old age, will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbors, and say ’To-morrow is Saint Crispian.

ON STAGE

“Henry V” speaks to his men.

"HENRY V" (CONT’D)
Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars.

The actor playing “Henry” kneels at the front of the stage. He speaks to the groundlings as though they are his troops.
HENRY V (CONT’D)
And say ‘These wounds I had on Crispin’s day.’ Old men forget: yet all shall be forgot, but he’ll remember with advantages what feats he did that day. This story shall the good man teach his son.

THE GROUNDLINGS
become literally spellbound.

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

The entire audience stands and CHEERS madly.

OXFORD
watches, with a pride he has never felt.

IN THE GALLERIES
The “wits” look at each other amazed.

ON STAGE

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

HENRY V
All things are ready, if our minds be so.

WESTMORELAND
Perish the man whose mind is backward now!
“HENRY V”
You know your places: God be with you all!

THE "HUT"

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

45 EXT. THE CITY GATES OF LONDON - DAY
Southampton and his retainers gallop through a City gate. Above the gate, the severed heads of murderers sit on pikes.

46 INT. THE ROSE THEATER - DAY
Actors portraying French soldiers STORM the stage, swords brandished. “Henry” and his men begin fighting them, their swordplay elaborate and impressive.

47 EXT. LONDON BRIDGE - DAY
Southampton and his entourage gallop over London Bridge.

48 INT. THE ROSE THEATER - DAY
The battle rages on stage.

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

49 EXT/INT. ROSE THEATER - DAY
Southampton arrives at the theater. He jumps off his horse, and hurries-- INTO THE STAIRWELL

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

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

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

Oxford processes this.

SOUTHAMPTON (CONT’D)
I’ve pledged to go with him, Edward. We sail in an hour.

OXFORD
Henry--

SOUTHAMPTON
I ask for your blessing, Edward.

OXFORD
I can’t give it to you.

IN THE GALLERIES

NASHE
I for one wish to see this anonymous colleague of ours.
(stands)
Playwright! Playwright!!

Marlowe and others join in. And--

BACKSTAGE

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

ON STAGE

--where he bows deeply, loving the adulation.

IN OXFORD’S BOX

SOUTHAMPTON
If he is to be my king, then it is my sacred duty to be with him in battle.
Oxford tries to understand Southampton, but then
notices Shakespeare on stage. His mouth opens in
shock, and he turns to look across the theater at--

JONSON

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

IN OXFORD’S BOX

Southampton is angered by Oxford’s distraction.

SOUTHAMPTON (CONT’D)

I am sorry to have disturbed your
entertainment.

And he exits.

OXFORD

Henry-- Henry!!

But the younger man is gone.

ON STAGE

Shakespeare bows, then--

SHAKESPEARE

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

OXFORD (O.S.)

An actor?!!

CUT TO:

50

INT. OXFORD STONE - STUDY - DAY

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

Jonson stands in front of a very angry Oxford.

OXFORD

An actor for god’s sake?

JONSON

My lord, I thought that--
OXFORD
You presumed to think? On my behalf? Whatever made you believe you had that prerogative?

A beat. Jonson is a bit afraid.

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

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

Jonson NODS.

OXFORD (CONT’D)
And will continue to do so?

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

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

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

OXFORD (CONT’D)
A romantic tragedy. In iambic pentameter.

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

OXFORD
Of course it is!

51 INN. OXFORD STONE - HALLWAY - DAY

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

He passes ANNE, Oxford’s wife (now 40’s), who is on her way to the study with their eldest daughter, BRIDGET (17).
She watches him go by and immediately realizes that she has seen him before. But she stays silent.

INT. OXFORD STONE - STUDY - DAY

Oxford is writing at a desk as Anne enters.

ANNE
Who was that man? I’ve seen him before.

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

ANNE (CONT’D)
Edward-- we must discuss our Bridget’s dowry.

OXFORD
(looking up - confused)
Dowry?

He remembers when he spies his daughter.

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

OXFORD
I can give her Brooke House and a hundred pounds.

BRIDGET
A hundred pounds? Father? Mother!

OXFORD
That is all we have to give at the moment.

The matter over, Oxford goes back to his writing.

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

Oxford turns.
OXFORD
Nero *fiddled* whilst Rome burned.

And then he goes back to writing.

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

She stares at him.

ANNE (CONT’D)
My god, you’re writing again, aren’t you? After you agreed-- after my father expressly forbade it!

Oxford turns to her, full of emotion

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

ANNE
Stop! Stop it at once!!

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

ANNE (CONT’D)
Why!? Why must you write?! Why must you continue to humiliate this family?

He stares at her, almost uncomprehendingly. Then--

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

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

She stares at him, horrified.

ANNE
Art thou possessed?

He stares back at her. A long beat

OXFORD
I... don’t know.

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

EXT. LONDON BRIDGE - DAY

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

Shakespeare caries and reads from a manuscript of “Romeo and Juliet”

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

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

SHAKESPEARE
And have you ever tried?

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

Shakespeare notices a BUXOM BLONDE women selling apples at the next stand.
SHAKESPEARE (CONT’D)
(performing for the
Blonde)
“But soft, what light through yonder
window breaks?
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.
Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious
moon,
Who is already sick and pale with
grief, That thou her maid art far more
fair than she.”

The Buxom Blonde smiles at Shakespeare seductively.

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

JONSON
You can’t play Romeo.

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

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

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

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

“ROMEO”
What lady’s that, which doth enrich the hand of yonder knight?

“SERVANT”
I know not, sir.

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

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

THE WOMEN
respond, eye lashes twittering.

THE WITS
Watch in awe! Now they’re all taking swigs of ale.

BACKSTAGE
Shakespeare mouthing silently the lines of “Romeo”.

IN OXFORD’S BOX
Oxford watches the dance carefully.

“ROMEO” (CONT’D)
Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight! For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. RICHMOND PALACE - GREAT HALL - NIGHT

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

YOUNG OXFORD-- now 20 is dancing with Young Anne. But his eyes are on:
Young Elizabeth, who is dancing with the Spanish AMBASSADOR.

YOUNG ELIZABETH

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

WIDER

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

YOUNG ELIZABETH AND YOUNG OXFORD

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

YOUNG ELIZABETH

My lord of Oxford.

Elizabeth smiles.

YOUNG ELIZABETH (CONT’D)

We liked your play tonight very much. Your young King Henry reminded us of you.

OXFORD

Did he?

YOUNG ELIZABETH

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

WIDER

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

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

YOUNG ELIZABETH (CONT’D)

We are glad of your return from the continent. Two years is far too long to be without such excellent amusements.

Young Oxford dips his head slightly in acknowledgment.
YOUNG OXFORD
If I had known my absence would cause your grace so much... longing, I would have returned much-- much-- sooner.

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

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

Young Oxford glances over at--

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

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

BACK TO YOUNG ELIZABETH AND YOUNG OXFORD
Still dancing.

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

A beat as this sinks in.

YOUNG ELIZABETH
(surprised)
Cecil had told me your match was one of love.

YOUNG OXFORD
And so he would wish.
(long beat)
But how could one ever love the moon, after having first seen the sun?

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

DISSOLVE TO:
EXT. RICHMOND PALACE - BALCONY - DAY

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

EXT. RICHMOND PALACE - FOREST - SAME TIME

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

EXT. RICHMOND PALACE - BALCONY - SAME TIME

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

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

Bessie turns to William Cecil.

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

The Ladies-in-waiting share knowing smiles.

EXT. RICHMOND PALACE - FOREST - SAME TIME

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

CUT TO:

INT. A ROYAL TENT - LATER

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

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

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

YOUNG OXFORD
I think Italy, your grace.
YOUNG ELIZABETH
And why is that? The weather? The food?

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

She raises an eyebrow.

YOUNG ELIZABETH
The women?

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

SLOW DISSOLVE TO:

59

INT. RICHMOND PALACE - RECEIVING CHAMBER - NIGHT

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

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

DISSOLVE TO:

LATER

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

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

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

(MORE)
--Puck

YOUNG OXFORD
(smiles)
Puck?

YOUNG ELIZABETH
Yes, Puck!

She’s only teasing.

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

YOUNG ELIZABETH
(surprised, smiles)
The Netherlands?

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

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

Her eyes narrow as she studies his face.

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

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

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

YOUNG ELIZABETH
Leave me. Leave at once!

A beat.

YOUNG OXFORD
Bess--

YOUNG ELIZABETH
How dare you! How dare you!! I command you to leave my presence.
And she steps back, waiting for him to exit.

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

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

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

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

YOUNG OXFORD (CONT’D)
Trip no further, pretty sweeting....

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

YOUNG OXFORD (CONT’D)
Journeys end in lovers’ meeting—
Every wise man’s son doth know.

A small smile escapes her lips.

YOUNG OXFORD (CONT’D)
What is love? ’tis not hereafter;
Present mirth hath present laughter;
What’s to come is still unsure:

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

YOUNG OXFORD (CONT’D)
In delay there lies no plenty—
Then come kiss me, Sweet-and-twenty,
Youth’s a stuff will not endure.

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

YOUNG ELIZABETH
(passionately)
You will stay in England... And in...
my chambers...
The flash of disappointment on Young Oxford’s face about that last bit is tempered by Young Elizabeth’s sheet falling to the floor. They begin to make love passionately once more.

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

INT. THE MERMAID’S TAVERN - DAY

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

MARLOWE
(to Nashe)
Do what?

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

JONSON
Think you so? Have you ever tried?

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

DEKKER
It wasn’t all in verse.

NASHE
Ha! See! Even easier!

Shakespeare enters and makes a bee line for them.

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

And Shakespeare goes over to the bar.
NASHE
A fortnight?

DEKKER
The maids love the romantic tragedies.

MARLOWE
Precisely why I avoid them.

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

INT./EXT. THE ROSE THEATER – DAY

A MONTAGE of various plays:
“TWELFTH NIGHT”
Viola and Sebastian are reunited...

“CAESAR”
Caesar is attacked by Brutus, Cinna, Cassius, etc...

“MACBETH”
The witches are on stage.

These three performances are INTER-CUT with:

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

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

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

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

The MONTAGE ends with...
A PLAYBILL

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

INT. ROSE THEATER - DAY

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

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

INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - AUDIENCE CHAMBER - DAY

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

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

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

INT. ROSE THEATER - DAY

Jonson watches tight lipped...

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

“GERTRUDE”
What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me? Help, ho!
“POLONIUS”
(behind curtain)
What ho, help!

“Hamlet” draws his sword.

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

“Hamlet” stabs “Polonius” through the curtain.

“POLONIUS”
O, I am slain.

“Polonius” emerges from behind the curtain, covered in pig’s blood, and dies an anguished death.

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

GROUNDLING
Not a day too soon for old Cecil!!

INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - AUDIENCE CHAMBER - DAY

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

“GERTRUDE”
O me, what hast thou done?

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

“HAMLET” (CONT’D)
Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell! I took thee for thy better: take thy fortune; Thou find'st to be too busy is some danger. Leave wringing of your hands: peace! sit you down, And let me wring your heart; for so I shall, If it be made of penetrable stuff, If damned custom have not brass'd it so That it is proof and bulwark against sense.
Elizabeth can’t take the itching anymore. She RIPS open her bodice and violently scratches some sort of rash on her chest.

INT/EXT. ROSE THEATER – DAY

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

JONSON

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

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

Loud thunder and...

RAIN STARTS TO FALL

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

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

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

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

SHAKESPEARE

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

THE MERMAID’S WITS

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

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

CUT TO:

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

Marlowe walks towards the Tower of London.

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

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

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

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

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

Pole reads more from the parchment.

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

Pole continues to read.

POLE
That is not for me to decide...

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

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

Marlowe takes the pouch of money.
ROBERT CECIL (O.S.)
He butchered you!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Robert Cecil looks hurt by his father’s anger.

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

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

Cecil produces a folded piece of parchment from the drawer, offers it to Robert Cecil.
WILLIAM CECIL (CONT’D)
From King James of Scotland.

Robert Cecil looks surprised.

INT. CECIL HOUSE - HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

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

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

ROBERT CECIL
I will reply to him?

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

INT. CECIL HOUSE - WILLIAM CECIL’S BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Robert Cecil wheels his father in.

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

A beat as this registers on Robert Cecil.

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

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

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

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

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

ROBERT CECIL
(confused)
Edward?

William Cecil is slowly falling asleep...

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

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

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

Off Robert Cecil’s surprised face we hear:

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

CUT TO:

INT. RICHMOND PALACE - LONG GALLERY - DUSK

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

Young Elizabeth turns to Bessie.

BESSIE
Two cycles have passed, my lord.

William Cecil thinks.

YOUNG ELIZABETH
I wish to marry him...

William Cecil looks startled.

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

YOUNG ELIZABETH
I can do what I will.

WILLIAM CECIL
Can you?

She gives him a sharp look.

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

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

YOUNG ELIZABETH
I love him...

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

He knows the answer to that.

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

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

Young Elizabeth is uncertain.

YOUNG ELIZABETH
And Edward?

WILLIAM CECIL
He must never know.

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

YOUNG OXFORD
What have you done?

WILLIAM CECIL
I am praying.

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

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

WILLIAM CECIL
She’s on Progress.

With this he leaves the chapel.

INT. CECIL HOUSE - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS
Young Oxford runs after him.

YOUNG OXFORD
Where? Where did she go?

William Cecil is silent.

YOUNG OXFORD (CONT’D)
What did you say to her? Tell me!
WILLIAM CECIL
The Queen does not ask for my advice about matters of the heart, Edward. If she had, she hardly would have chosen you for her pleasure.

He has a point.

WILLIAM CECIL (CONT’D)
You must have known her eye would move elsewhere, Edward. It always has. You are neither the first, nor the last, of her lovers.

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

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

WILLIAM CECIL (CONT’D)
Go back to my daughter, Edward. She will accept you with open arms, as she always has. Behave as your great title demands you behave. Tend to your estates, your investments.
(a beat)
And make me a grandson, an heir!

Off Young Oxford’s pained expression.

CUT TO:

INT. MERMAID’S TAVERN - NIGHT

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

MARLOWE (O.S.)
It’s difficult to write, isn’t it? After watching something like “Hamlet”...


MARLOWE (CONT’D)
I’ve seen you watch him. Will. During a performance. It eats at you... at your soul...
Jonson stares at him, his answer obvious.

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

JONSON
(shrugs)
Perhaps they haven’t noticed..

Jonson gets up and walks towards the door.

MARLOWE
I made sure they did...

Jonson turns around.

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

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

Jonson is stunned.

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

JONSON
Why are you here, Kit?

MARLOWE
(smiles)
So who did write it? You? No. You’d take credit for it. No...

(MORE)
MARLOWE (CONT’D)
It must be someone who wants their anonymity protected. Someone who might even pay to have it protected.

Jonson is getting nervous.

MARLOWE (CONT’D)
A nobleman.

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

MARLOWE (CONT’D)
But which? You know, don’t you, Ben?

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

Jonson stands and hurries out of the Tavern.

EXT. BANKSIDE LONDON - MOMENTS LATER

Jonson heads down the street, Marlowe chasing after him.

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

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

MARLOWE
(lying)
Ben, Ben... I had nothing to do with that.

Jonson studies Marlowe for a beat and then walks away.

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

But Jonson is gone.
EXT. MILITARY CAMP - IRELAND - DAY

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

CLOSER

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

INT. ESSEX’S TENT - CONTINUOUS

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

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

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

GENERAL
(clears throat, uncomfortable)
My lord. ‘Tis a well-defended fortress. Two thousand men at least. We cannot--

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

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

SOUTHAMPTON
Robert!

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

Everyone is shocked-- but then we see:
THE SERVANT

had drawn his own, small wooden pistol.

ESSEX

shares a look with Southampton.

EXT. OXFORD STONE - GARDEN - DAY

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

CLOSER

They wear outfits that are slightly more protective than ornamental.

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

BEAULIEU

Point!

Oxford backs off, as does the fencing master.

OXFORD

(in French)

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

BEAULIEU

Mais oui, mon seigneur.

OXFORD

Bien. En garde!

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

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

OXFORD (CONT’D)

Qu’est ce que vous faites?

But Oxford has little chance to react, because Beaulieu continues his attack.
OXFORD (CONT’D)

Beaulieu?  Beaulieu?!

This has become an assassination attempt, not an exercise.

ENTRANCE OF THE MAZE

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

CENTER OF THE MAZE

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

IN THE MAZE

Francesco heads for the center as--

IN THE CENTER OF THE MAZE

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

IN THE MAZE

Francesco hears the scream, and starts to run.

FRANCESCO

Signor?  Signor?!

IN THE CENTER OF THE MAZE

Oxford collapses as Francesco rushes in.

FRANCESCO (CONT’D)

Signor?  Mio dio!  Signor!  What has happened--

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

OXFORD

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

EXT. BANKSIDE LONDON - DAY

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

What’s all that, then?

A body...

Jonson peers over and sees:

A BODY

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

JONSON

is stunned.

MAN (CONT’D)

Must have been a cut-purse. Nowhere’s bloody safe anymore, I’ll tell you that...

CUT TO:

INT. A BEAR-BAITING THEATER - DAY

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

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

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

BEAR BAITER

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

Shakespeare suddenly sits next Jonson hardly notices.

SHAKESPEARE

I need more money.

JONSON

More--? You already make more than any playwright Bankside.
BEAR BAITER
But then here, good friends, I bring you a pack of dogs so fierce, so dangerous, that Medusa herself would shrink in fear!

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

Jonson suddenly turns to him.

JONSON
Your work?

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

A MAN
Fourpence on three dogs!

SHAKESPEARE
They insist only a gentleman can own the land.

ANOTHER MAN
A shilling on four!

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

JONSON
Impossible.

ANOTHER MAN
Eight shillings on six dogs! Eight shillings on six dogs!

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

ANOTHER MAN
Done!

SHAKESPEARE
Bad bet, that.

JONSON
(to Shakespeare)
You’ll have to make do with what you’ve got. I won’t be your beggar.
Shakespeare gives him a look to kill.

**SHAKESPEARE**
This isn’t a request, Ben. I’ll have more money.

**JONSON**
Or what? You’ll slit my throat like you did Kit’s?

**MAN**
Release the dogs! Release the dogs!

Shakespeare shows no reaction.

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

**IN THE PIT**
The bear baiting begins.

**WIDER**
Shakespeare stares at Jonson.

**SHAKESPEARE**
(dead serious)
You’re mad, Ben. Kit was my friend.

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

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

**SHAKESPEARE**
I’ll have my guineas, Ben. One way or another, I’ll have my guineas.

And he gets up and leaves as the--

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

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

EXT. LONDON BRIDGE - DAY

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

Then Oxford’s servant, Francesco, appears.

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

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

EXT. THE THAMES RIVER - DUSK

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

EXT. OXFORD STONE - DUSK

Shakespeare watches as Francesco enters Oxford Stone.

OMIT

CUT TO:

INT. OXFORD STONE - STUDY - DUSK

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

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

OXFORD

So! You are the famous Shakespeare whose labors I have enjoyed so much. I am at your service, sir.
Shakespeare is uncomfortable. He wasn’t expecting Oxford himself. Then he just goes for it.

SHAKESPEARE
My lord-- I- I need more money.

OXFORD
(slow)
I beg your pardon?

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

OXFORD
“Aggrandized”? 

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

FRANCESCO
Have you any idea to whom you are speaking?

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

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

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

OXFORD
Wait!

(beat)
How much?

Shakespeare looks at Francesco, then Oxford.

SHAKESPEARE
Four hundred pounds. A year.

FRANCESCO
A year?

OXFORD
Pay him.
Francesco is shocked.

**OXFORD (CONT’D)**

(impatient, in Italian)

Pagalo!

Shakespeare smiles.

**81**

**EXT. OXFORD STONE - DUSK**

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

**82**

**INT. OXFORD STONE - STUDY - DUSK**

Oxford watches Shakespeare walk down the road through a window.

**FRANCESCO**

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

**OXFORD**

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

Francesco stares at Oxford who is deep in thought.

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

**83**

**INT. CECIL HOUSE - YOUNG OXFORD’S BEDROOM - NIGHT**

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

**DISSOLVE TO:**

**84**

**INT. CECIL HOUSE - YOUNG OXFORD’S BEDROOM - NIGHT**

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

**BESSIE**

Edward... You know she would be furious if she found out about this...
Young Oxford doesn’t answer. He is deep in thought.

    BESSIE (CONT’D)
    She still loves you.

    YOUNG OXFORD
    No. She abandoned me.

    BESSIE
    You don’t know, do you?

He looks at her quizzically.

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

85      EXT. CECIL HOUSE - EARLY MORNING
A carriage drives towards the house.

85A     INT. CARRIAGE - EARLY MORNING
Young Anne de Vere holds her sleeping daughter in her arms.

86      INT. CECIL HOUSE - HALLWAY - EARLY MORNING
Bessie carefully closes Oxford’s bedroom door and suddenly freezes.

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

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

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

    CUT TO:

87      INT. RICHMOND PALACE - GREAT HALL - DAY
Young Elizabeth looks out a window, obviously distressed. William Cecil is across from her, his face tense.
WILLIAM CECIL
But sometime soon after your return to Court.

YOUNG ELIZABETH
You’re sure?

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

She is crushed.

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

Young Elizabeth freezes, stunned. Then--

YOUNG ELIZABETH
Arrest them. Arrest them both!

William Cecil bows and exits.

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

87A
EXT. TOWER OF LONDON - DAY

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

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

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

William Cecil enters.

WILLIAM CECIL
Your whore gave birth last week.

Young Oxford turns to William Cecil. The stare at each other for a beat.
WILLIAM CECIL (CONT’D)
The Queen has decided to release you. It seems time does indeed heal all wounds.
(beat)
These are her conditions for your release. One. You will not acknowledge the child. Two. You will never see the mother again. Three. You will avoid Court at all costs. Her majesty would prefer not to be reminded of you in any way ever again.

A beat as Young Oxford thinks on all this.

YOUNG OXFORD
Banished...?

WILLIAM CECIL
No. You have the freedom of the kingdom. Just not of the Court.
(beat)
Those are her terms. Here are mine. You will go back to my daughter. You will make some effort to make her happy and you will finally act according to your station in life, and accept the responsibilities of your great title.

Oxford reluctantly NODS. William Cecil goes to leave.

YOUNG OXFORD
My lord! I, too, have a condition.

William Cecil turns.

YOUNG OXFORD (CONT’D)
I will go back to your daughter if... You tell me the name of the child.

WILLIAM CECIL
I don’t know if the whore has even delivered the--

YOUNG OXFORD
No. The other one.

Cecil’s face goes to stone.

WILLIAM CECIL
The other one?
(realizing)
Who told you?
Cecil is obviously annoyed by this development.

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

William Cecil thinks.

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

William Cecil decides.

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

YOUNG OXFORD
The name?

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

YOUNG OXFORD
(excited)
It’s a boy...?

EXT. CECIL HOUSE - GARDEN - DAY

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

The boy notices Young Oxford, and stops duelling.

BOY
Hello...

YOUNG OXFORD
Hello.

Young Oxford smiles at the boy.

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

My lord...

The Boy bows, a serious expression on his face.

YOUNG OXFORD

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

BOY

I shall be the Earl of Southampton.

YOUNG OXFORD

(smiling)

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

CUT TO:

INT. WESTMINSTER ABBEY - DAY

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

ELIZABETH

looking completely stricken, approaches the coffin, holding Cecil’s white cane. She places it at his side. In the background we hear the Archbishop of Canterbury reading from the bible.

ARCHBISHOP (O.S.)

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

ROBERT CECIL

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

OXFORD

watches stoically, his wife and children at his side.
The funeral over, Elizabeth exits the portal of Westminster Abbey and heads to her carriage. A huge crowd of mourners has assembled.

Robert Cecil steps into place right behind her.

ELIZABETH
We wish to recall Essex from Ireland...

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

ELIZABETH (CONT’D)
We feel a terrible void, now that your father is no longer at our side...

Robert Cecil bows his head as he walks.

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

Still walking, she turns to him sharply.

ELIZABETH
Rumors?

ROBERT CECIL
I’m sorry, majesty, I thought you’d heard.

ELIZABETH
Heard what?

ROBERT CECIL
Essex is in negotiations with Philip of Spain...

ELIZABETH
Peace is at hand. We know this.

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

He hesitates.
ELIZABETH
In return for what?

ROBERT CECIL
Spain’s support of Essex’s claim to the throne of England...

They have arrived at her carriage.

ROBERT CECIL (CONT’D)
(beat)
It is, as of yet, just rumor.

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

ROBERT CECIL
(correcting)
Robert, majesty.

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

ROBERT CECIL (CONT’D)
My father’s death has been a great loss for us all...

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

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

CUT TO:

HORSE HOOVES

as they gallop over emerald green grasses. We are:

92  EXT. A MILITARY FIELD IN IRELAND – DAY
A group of horsemen gallop into Essex’s camp. A MESSENGER jumps off his horse and heads for Essex’s tent.

93  INT. ESSEX’S TENT – DAY
Where Essex and Southampton are having dinner as the messenger enters. He bows.
MESSENGER

My lord...

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

Southampton picks up the parchment and begins reading.

SOUTHAMPTON

She can’t believe this...

ESSEX

Oh, can’t she?

SOUTHAMPTON

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

Essex heads for the flap of the tent.

ESSEX

We leave with the tide!

CUT TO:

INT. THE MERMAID’S TAVERN – NIGHT

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

SHAKESPEARE

Well, I’ve got it!

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

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

SHAKESPEARE (CONT’D)

The herald just finished it not an hour ago.

(smiles)

Well?

Everyone is confused by it.

NASHE

It’s quite... colorful.
DEKKER
What in blazes is it?

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

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

DEKKER
I can’t quite make out the motto...
Non sanz... Non...

SHAKESPEARE
“Non sanz droict”.

NASHE
Not without--

JONSON
Right!? Not without right?
(beat)
You went to him, didn’t you? You
lying knave-- you went to him!

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

SHAKESPEARE
(smiles)
Ben. Ben! Let me buy you a--

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

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

Shakespeare looks at the confused Nashe and Dekker
nervously.

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

JONSON
I swore to him I wouldn’t tell you his
name. Swore it! Do you have any idea
what he might do to me? Do you?
(to Nashe)
(MORE)
JONSON (CONT’D)
He’s not even a writer you know. He can’t even--

SHAKESPEARE
Ben-- you’ve had too much to drink.

Shakespeare grabs Jonson.

JONSON
Unhand me!

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

JONSON (CONT’D)
Here!
(looks around)
A quill! A quill!

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

JONSON (CONT’D)
(re: the parchment)
Go on, Will. Write something for us. Now. Go on! Amaze us with your verse. Your wit! No? Try astounding us with the letter “E”. Or an “I”-- it’s just a straight line!

Shakespeare stares at him.

SHAKESPEARE
You haven’t got any ink.

And he exits.

CUT TO:

95 EXT. THE CITY GATES OF LONDON - DAY
Southampton and Essex are on horseback, followed by several dozen armed retainers, GALLOPING towards the city of London.

96 EXT. WHITEHALL PALACE - COURTYARD - DAY
The party rides into the first gate. The palace is the city residence of the Queen, and is at the edge of the City.
Essex and Southampton jump off their horses.

INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - HALLWAY - DAY

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

INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - AUDIENCE CHAMBER - DAY

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

ESSEX
(to Southampton)
Wait for me.

And he continues on into--

INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - OLD ELIZABETH’S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

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

She turns to see Essex, shocked at his intrusion.

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

ESSEX
Majesty, I, I...

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

ELIZABETH
Get out! Out!!!

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

ELIZABETH (O.S.)
(CONT’D)
The insolence!
INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - AUDIENCE CHAMBER - DAY

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

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

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

ELIZABETH (CONT’D)
Coming into our presence in such a manner, neither announced nor invited,
half his army in my courtyard. He’s gone mad... mad!

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

She turns to him sharply, furious at the thought.

EXT. ESSEX HOUSE - DAY

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

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

OXFORD
I am Edward, Earl of Oxford.

SOUTHAMPTON
Edward! Edward! Thank god you’re here.

Southampton comes towards him.

SOUTHAMPTON (CONT’D)
Elizabeth has revoked all of his royal licenses! She believes every lie Cecil tells about him.
(seeing Oxford’s wound)
Edward? What happened to your leg?
OXFORD
(shrugs)
Nothing.

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

102  INT. ESSEX HOUSE - HALL - DAY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Essex looks confused, but Oxford ignores it.

OXFORD (CONT’D)
She will call for me. And while I am with her, you will come-- not with an army, not with swords, but with her loyal subjects. The cobblers, the tinkers, the bricklayers of London.
   (MORE)
All, all calling for Robert Cecil’s banishment from Court. Words, Robert, words, will prevail with her, not swords.

Essex looks unsure.

ESSEX
And the mob? How will I--

OXFORD
Leave that to me.

OXFORD (CONT’D)

INT. OXFORD STONE - A STUDY - NIGHT

Oxford is in his rooms, writing feverishly by candlelight.

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

The Tragedie of Richard III

INT. A ROOM ABOVE THE MERMAID’S TAVERN - DAY

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

Shakespeare is bedding a buxom young lady.

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

FRANCESCO
(to the whore)
Hold your tongue, whore, and get out!

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

FRANCESCO (CONT’D)
(to the whore)
Out, woman!

WHORE
Oi. ‘Oo’s going to pay me then?
Shakespeare gives a look to Oxford-- he certainly isn’t going to pay for it.

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

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

Shakespeare looks confused.

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

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

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

SHAKESPEARE
(confused)
Published? You mean like in a book?

Renaissance MUSIC BEGINS as we--

CUT TO:

A PIECE OF PAPER

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

105 INT. A PRINT SHOP – DAY 105

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

SHAKESPEARE (V.O.)
‘The boar!’ quoth she; whereat a sudden pale,
Like lawn being spread upon the blushing rose...
Usurps her cheek; she trembles at his tale,

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

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

105A
EXT. THE PRINT SHOP - DAY

Shakespeare exits the Print Shop, continuing to read the book, now out-loud.

SHAKESPEARE (V.O.)
She sinketh down, still hanging by his neck,
He on her belly falls, she on her back.
   (not quoting)
Oh, I like this...

DISSOLVE TO:

106
OMIT

A COVER OF “VENUS AND ADONIS”

that is held by a woman.

   LADY IN WAITING (O.S.)
   'Fondling,' she saith,
   I'll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer;
   Feed where thou wilt, on mountain or in dale:

We are:

107
INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - AUDIENCE CHAMBER - DAY

A LADY-IN-WAITING is reading out loud to other Ladies. They listen giggling now and then. We only see them from the back.

   LADY IN WAITING
   Graze on my lips; and if those hills be dry,
   Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie.
SECOND LADY IN WAITING
(continuing)
Seeds spring from seeds, and beauty
breedeth beauty;
Thou wast begot; to beget is thy duty.
By law of nature thou art bound to
breed...

They look up and see--

ELIZABETH

standing across the room. How much has she heard?

WIDER

They all stand abruptly, worried. The women who was
reading the book puts it down on a table.

Elizabeth silently walks over to them, and picks up the
book. She opens it as we--

CUT TO:

108   INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - HALLWAY - DUSK

Robert Cecil walks down the long hall, heading for an
audience with the queen. Two guards open a door,
letting him into--

109   INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - OLD ELIZABETH’S BEDROOM - DUSK

Elizabeth is looking out the window. It’s raining
outside. She is NOT wearing her wig, not much make-up,
and looks quite... odd.

Robert Cecil enters.

ELIZABETH
(turns)
You find me disgusting, don’t you?
Repugnant. Wrinkled?

ROBERT CECIL
You, you are the sun, majesty. The
glory of--

ELIZABETH
Liar!

Robert Cecil shuts his mouth.
ELIZABETH (CONT’D)
Is it so hard to believe that once I
was young? That I was... beautiful?
Your father knew me as such...
(beat)
You have read the book?

She doesn’t have to say which one. Robert Cecil sees a
copy of “Venus and Adonis” on a table. He NODS.

ELIZABETH (CONT’D)
He writes to me. To remind me of that
beauty. That love. How I... took
him. How I... adored him...

Robert Cecil knows to be silent. She looks out the
window.

ELIZABETH (CONT’D)
(throaty, sexually)
Graze on my lips; and if those hills
be dry,
Stray lower, where the pleasant
fountains lie...

She smiles seductively, transported in time.

ELIZABETH (CONT’D)
I’ve been foolish. Proud. Yes. Too
proud. Gloriana... The Virgin
Queen... A statue. Bloodless.
(beat)
“Thou wast begot; to beget is thy
duty.
By law of nature thou art bound to
breed, That thine may live when thou
thyself art dead”...
(beat)
Your father told you of the child?

A beat.

ROBERT CECIL
(hint of a smile)
Which one, your majesty?

Elizabeth’s eyes flare in anger for an instant, then
she regains composure.

ELIZABETH
His. Mine. He still lives?

Robert Cecil nods.
ELIZABETH (CONT’D)
He was well placed? A nobleman?

ROBERT CECIL
(hesitates)
Yes... your majesty.

ELIZABETH
Who?

Robert Cecil hesitates.

ELIZABETH (CONT’D)
I am your Queen! Now who is my son!!?

ROBERT CECIL
His grace, the Earl of... Southampton, your majesty.

She seems surprised. Perhaps she was expecting Essex. But then she smiles, and NODS in approval.

CECIL
Majesty... You are not having doubts about James of Scotland succeeding you, are you?

Elizabeth goes into a rage.

ELIZABETH
James?! He is the son of Mary! She plotted and schemed to steal the throne from under me! No son of hers will rule while a yet Tudor lives!

Robert Cecil is surprised by her fury. He bows his head as Elizabeth tries to collect herself.

ELIZABETH (CONT’D)
I will decide what is best for my kingdom! Not you! Not you!!
(calmer)
I have bid Edward to come to me on my return to London on Monday next. It is decided.

She says no more, the audience over. Robert Cecil hesitates, and then she glares at him... He bows and exits, the fury on his face plain.

Elizabeth looks at her own reflection in the window...
ELIZABETH (CONT’D)
(sotto)
And so, in spite of death, I shall survive,
In that, my likeness still is left alive.

CUT TO:

110  EXT. BANKSIDE LONDON - DAY

Ben Jonson walks with a manuscript in his hands. He stops for a moment when he sees the new Globe theater. Workers are still painting the walls.

He pauses when he sees a poster in front advertising a performance of “Richard III” on Monday next.

110A  INT. THE GLOBE THEATER - DAY

Jonson sticks his head in and takes in the glorious new theater Shakespeare and Burbage have built.

The actor Condell is on stage, rehearsing the character of “Gloucester”. He walks on stage with a limp, and has a large hump on his back. He is a caricature of Robert Cecil.

"GLOUCESTER"
(in character)
But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks, nor made to court an amorous looking-glass...

Richard BURBAGE, the theater’s stage manager, is watching his performance with Spencer and a group of actors.

Jonson stops and watches the rehearsal for a beat.

"GLOUCESTER" (CONT’D)
(in character)
I, that am curtail’d of this fair proportion, deformed, unfinish’d, sent before my time into this breathing world...

SPENCER
Good part, that...
“GLOUCESTER”
...and that so lamely and
unfashionable that dogs bark at me as
I halt by them.
(out of character)
Is this wise?

BURBAGE
It’s only the one performance. Go on!

“GLOUCESTER”
I need a drink...

And “Gloucester” heads backstage.

JONSON
(to Burbage)
Burbage. Wonderful theater. Wonderful! The best Bankside! But only one performance? Is it that bad?

BURBAGE
Hardly, it’s Will’s new play. Richard the Third. We’ve been hired to perform it free to the public.

JONSON
Free?

BURBAGE
Aye. Some anonymous nobleman paid for everything. God knows Will never would. Been rehearsing all week, just found out this morning, we go up next Monday.

Jonson thinks a beat-- that’s odd-- but then holds up his manuscript.

JONSON
(grins)
My best so far. I guarantee more than one performance. Though I’ll not pay for the tickets myself.
(winks)
No need to.

BURBAGE
Sorry, Ben...

Jonson looks confused.
BURBAGE (CONT’D)
Will... He’s part owner... I’m sorry
Ben, but I had to agree no Jonson
plays at the Globe... Ever.

Jonson is in shock.

CUT TO:

INT. THE MERMAID’S TAVERN - NIGHT

Jonson is deep in drink, by himself. He listens as patrons of the bar say:

MAN
(to a woman)
You doin’ tomorrow?

WOMAN
You askin?  

MAN
Managed to get two tickets to Shakespeare’s latest. Cost me a fortune.

PASSING MAN
Ballocks, did it! They’re giving them away free.

Some of the actors from the rehearsal enter, all jolly and excited. They head for the bar. They are: The ACTOR WHO PLAYED “GLOUCESTER”, Spencer, Pope, Heminge, etc...

SPENCER
Best villain in the history of theater, Richard the Third. No doubt.

HEMINGE
Come on. Better than Mephistopheles?

SPENCER
No doubt! Your Marlowe-- god rest his soul-- is fine for your everyday scalawag, and your Jonson won’t even try the hard drama. No, this is Shakespeare, for god’s sake! The man knows drama. I tell you, not even the Greeks compare!
(toasting)
To Shakespeare! And villainy!
To Shakespeare! And villainy!

Jonson gets up, furious, and exits, quite drunk. The actors don’t even notice him.

EXT. STREET IN FRONT OF TOWER OF LONDON - NIGHT

Jonson stumbles down the streets, alone, deep in his own private hell. It’s raining.

WHORE
Fancy a tumble? Only sixpence!

Jonson waves her off. He looks up and sees:

FROM HIS POV:

The Tower of London. He makes a decision.

INT. THE TOWER OF LONDON - POLE’S ROOM - DAY

Jonson sits in the same spot where Marlowe was sitting earlier. And he hates himself for it. Rain drips down the windows.

Pole looks up from some papers.

POLE
I haven’t got all day, man.

JONSON
I... There is a-- there is a play to be performed... on Monday.

POLE
There’s many plays to be performed next Monday, isn’t there?

JONSON
Yes, my lord, but this one is to be performed one performance, and one performance only. On Monday. All Bankside is talking of it.

(beat)
The History of King Richard the Third.
By William Shakespeare.

Pole is confused. So?
JONSON (CONT’D)
He kills his brother the king, and
half the royal family to get the
throne for himself--

POLE
I know who Richard the Third was.

JONSON
Yes. Of course you do. But in
William Shakespeare’s version, he is
played as a hunch-back.

Pole realizes this is significant.

115 INT. CECIL HOUSE – THE PRIVATE CHAPEL – DAWN

Robert Cecil has prayed all night. His lips silently
move in a prayer for a miracle.

When Pole appears he doesn’t stop his prayer. Only
after Pole whispers in his ear does he stop and look
slowly up to the simple cross and close his eyes in
relief.

116 EXT. LONDON – DAY

From high, high above a city of 200,000 souls. It’s a
beautiful sunny day, but black storm clouds are on the
horizon.

All of London is on its feet. They all are on their way
to Bankside.

The London Bridge is crammed one way. The River Thames
is full of many small boats of theatergoers.

117 EXT. BANKSIDE – IN FRONT OF THE GLOBE – DAY

We see that a huge crowd has formed in front of the
Globe.

118 INT. THE GLOBE THEATER – BACKSTAGE – DAY

Everyone is busy, preparing for the performance;
actors, stage-hands, etc...

Shakespeare adjusts an actor’s costume when Burbage
walks up besides him.
BURBAGE

We have to turn ‘em away by the hundreds! Look! Never seen anything quite like it!

And both men look out the curtains to the crowd outside.

The theater is full to the last seat. The people are crammed together like sardines.

118A

INT. OXFORD STONE - OXFORD’S ROOM - NIGHT

Oxford is being dressed in front of a mirror... His finest clothes... Powder to face...

Francesco assists him.

118AA

INT. THE GLOBE THEATER - THE GALLERIES - DAY

Jonson is leaning against the edge of the balustrade, watching the Groundlings fill in. He bites his nails nervous.

Nashe joins him as--

NASHE

So! I heard the Earl of Essex paid for this whole performance! Man’s never even been to the theater, and still he’s heard of Will--

Dekker also joins them.

DEKKER

Essex!? Impossible. My cousin’s one of his men-at-arms. Hasn’t been paid in weeks. They’re all just sitting there, waiting.

JONSON

Waiting? Waiting for what?

DEKKER

Wants to have an audience with the Queen. As if Cecil would ever let Essex near her now.

NASHE

By the mass, Cecil in favor, Essex out! Who can keep up with it all!? (takes a swig) (MORE)
Zounds, I tire of politics, politics, politics.

EXT. THE THAMES RIVER - DAY

Oxford is in a long-boat, headed for Whitehall Palace. The oars of the boat cut neatly and silently into the water.

INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - OLD ELIZABETH’S BEDROOM - DAY

Elizabeth is doing her toilette. She seems excited like a school girl before her first date. Her Ladies in waiting are attending to her.

INT. THE GLOBE THEATER - DAY

The audience HUSHES as--

ON STAGE

"GLOUCESTER", the future Richard III, enters. He is hunch-backed, and looks as much like Robert Cecil as possible in terms of beard and costume. First the people are in stunned silence, but then like magic the hissing starts. It is followed by more hissing and the first boos.

The actor playing Gloucester nervously looks around...

IN THE GALLERIES

Dekker seems surprised at the similarity to Robert Cecil.

DEKKER
(to Nashe)
Tired of politics are you? Seems you picked the wrong day to come to the theater, then...

Jonson gives Dekker a sharp look. What’s going on here?

ON STAGE

“Gloucester” addresses the audience.

"GLOUCESTER"
Now is the winter of our discontent
made glorious summer by this son of York. Grim-visaged war hath smooth'd his wrinkled front....
The hissing and booing has swelled so strong that the actor stops for a moment. But then he finds the courage again to continue.

Jonson looks down at the Groundling’s reaction, and spots--

FRANCESCO

in the audience. But among the Groundlings, not in Oxford’s usual box seat.

JONSON

looks over to Oxford’s box. It’s empty.

“GLOUCESTER”

...and now instead of mounting barded steeds to fright the souls of fearful adversaries, he capers nimbly in a lady’s chamber to the lascivious pleasing of a lute. But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks, nor made to court an amorous looking-glass...

INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - ROBERT CECIL’S ROOM - DAY

Robert Cecil watches himself in a mirror as armor is placed on him by servants.

“GLOUCESTER” (O.S.)

I, that am curtail’d of this fair proportion, deformed, unfinish’d, sent before my time into this breathing world,...

EXT. BANKSIDE - IN FRONT OF THE GLOBE THEATER - DAY

The huge crowd has stayed in front of the Globe. It seems they are waiting for something. We hear hissing and booing from the crowd inside the theater.

“GLOUCESTER”

...and that so lamely and unfashionable that dogs bark at me as I halt by them.
INT. THE GLOBE THEATER - DAY

On stage, “Gloucester: continues despite the concert of hissing and booing...

“GLOUCESTER”
And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover, I am determined to prove a villain and hate the idle pleasures of these days...

EXT. ESSEX HOUSE - DAY

Essex mounts his horse, Southampton at his side. Their sixty or so men behind them ready for the march to Elizabeth.

ESSEX
Edward knows what he is doing... Does he not?

SOUTHAMPTON
He promised us a mob. They’ll be here.

Essex looks concerned, but says no more.

INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - ROBERT CECIL’S ROOM - DAY

The servant tightens the last strap of Robert Cecil’s armor. He smiles at himself in the mirror.

“GLOUCESTER” (O.S.)
Plots have I laid!

CANNONS DRAWN BY HORSES
as they roll down a cobbled street. We are:

EXT. LONDON BRIDGE - DAY

Soldiers move people and carts off the street. Others put CANNONS into place and then cover them with canvas tarps.

“GLOUCESTER” (O.S.)
Inductions dangerous, by drunken prophecies, libels and dreams, to set my brother Clarence and the king in deadly hate the one against the other.
INT. THE GLOBE THEATER – DAY

Shakespeare watches from backstage, getting more and more nervous by the audience’s reaction.

AN AUDIENCE MEMBER
(to the actor playing “Gloucester”)
A pox on you!

FRANCESCO
A pox on Cecil!

MORE AUDIENCE MEMBERS
A pox on Cecil! A pox on Cecil!

The actors are getting nervous. People start throwing lettuce and tomatoes at them.

NASHE
Why is Oxford’s man with the Groundlings?

BACKSTAGE

Shakespeare and Burbage exchange a worried glance.

EXT. ESSEX HOUSE – DAY

The BELLS of St. James’ Cathedral mark the hour as five o’clock. Essex looks to Southampton nervously.

INT. THE GLOBE THEATER – DAY

The play continues. “Gloucester” is plotting yet another death on his way to the throne.

“GLOUCESTER”
Hath she forgot already that brave prince,
Edward, her lord, whom I, some three months since,
Stabb’d in my angry mood at Tewksbury?
A sweeter and a lovelier gentleman—
Fram’d in the prodigality of nature, Young, valiant, wise, and
no doubt right royal—

FRANCESCO
Down with Cecil!

The actor playing “Gloucester” hesitates. The audience is getting unruly.
FRANCESCO (CONT’D)
Up with Essex! To Essex House! To Essex House!!

IN THE GALLERIES

Jonson is putting the pieces together. He stands.

JONSON
This is what Essex is waiting for--
(realizing)
Oxford is bringing him a mob.

Jonson heads for the stairs.

NASHE
Why would Oxford--

JONSON
I don’t know, I don’t know! But, the Tower-- Cecil, he already knows. He knows!
(looks at Francesco)
I-- I have to warn them!

Nashe and Dekker are baffled as Jonson rushes down the stairs.

VARIOUS GROUNDLINGS
Up with Essex! Essex! Death to Cecil!

BACKSTAGE

Shakespeare turns to Burbage.

SHAKESPEARE
We must close the play. Now!!

BURBAGE
Close the...? Are you off your head?

We can start to HEAR the audience chanting “Ess-ex, Ess-ex”...

ON STAGE

It’s getting unruly.

“GLOUCESTER”
(repeating)
Fram’d... in the prodigality of nature, Young, valiant, wise, and no doubt right royal-
“Ess-ex, Ess-ex, Ess-ex”

ON THE GROUND

Jonson pushes his way through the crowd, trying to head for Francesco. But they’re separated by a sea of people.

FRANCESCO
To Essex House! To Essex House!
Death to Cecil! Traitor!

A moment as the whole audience thinks on this. And then these chants are repeated by hundreds in the audience as they are pushing towards exits.

And Jonson—still struggling to reach Francesco—is carried along with the mob.

132 EXT. OUTSIDE THE GLOBE THEATER - DAY
The mob pours out of the doors.

Storm clouds are gathering. A RUMBLE of thunder sounds in the distance.

133 INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - HALLWAY - DAY
Oxford is waiting for his audience, looking out a window, nervously.

134 EXT. BANKSIDE LONDON - DAY
The crowd pours through Bankside, growing in numbers as more people come out of taverns, whore-houses, etc...

A shop-owner comes out of his store, confused. Another MAN grabs him.

MAN
To Essex! And then to the Queen!
(joins in the chanting)
Ess-ex! Ess-ex!

The shop-owner begins to get the spirit of the mob.

135 EXT. LONDON BRIDGE - DAY
If anything, the crowd is twice the size it was moments ago. They head down the shop-lined bridge, full of bravado.
JONSON

is in the middle of the uncontrolled mob. He spots Francesco nearby.

WIDER

The mob has to slow down on the bridge. There is not much room. And then it happens!

We are at the front of the mob, when the first soldiers appear and pull down the tarps revealing the cannons.

People scream as an Officer appears and--

OFFICER

Fire!

And then the cannon FIRES. There is PANIC all around, and-

JONSON

runs with the crowd, trying to escape.

137

EXT. ESSEX HOUSE - DAY

Essex and Southampton look tense. They expected a mob here by now.

SOUTHAMPTON

They should be here by now...

Essex frowns.

ESSEX

We go as we are! Now!!

And he spurs his horse, and GALLOPS down the street.

ESSEX (CONT’D)

To the Queen!

Southampton has no choice, and follows. So do the 60 or so men behind them.

136

INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - HALLWAY - DAY

Oxford hears a cannon shot. But it could also be the sound of thunder. He goes to the window, sees the rain clouds, and dismisses the sound. A LADY IN WAITING enters.
LADY-IN-WAITING
My lord. Her majesty will be with you shortly.

138 Omitted

139 EXT. LONDON BRIDGE - DAY
The mob is in panic. And--
JONSON
is in the middle of it.

FRANCESCO
Signor Jonson! We are betrayed! Run! Run!

Jonson looks on in horror as Francesco is KILLED by a soldier wielding a pike.

140 EXT. WHITEHALL PALACE - COURTYARD - DAY
Essex and his men ROAR past the token guards at the front gate, and gallop into the--
MAIN COURTYARD
Essex rears his horse, looks around at the many windows that surround them from above.

ESSEX
To the Queen! To the Queen!

His men repeat his plea. And then, once again, another trap springs.

THE GATE
SLAMS closed. And--
GUARDS ARMED WITH MUSKETS
line up in a colonnade in the story above. Pole is in command.

POLE
Take your aim!

SOUTHAMPTON
realizes--
SOUTHAMPTON
It’s a trap!

ESSEX
Spread out!

But before his men can obey--

IN THE COLONNADE
Pole orders--

POLE
Fire!!

IN THE COURTYARD
AND a hundred shots FIRE down into Essex and his men!

141
INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - HALLWAY - DAY

Oxford HEARS the SHOTS fired. Confused, he goes to a window, looks out and sees:

FROM HIS POV:
Men fall all around Essex and Southampton.

141A
EXT. WHITEHALL PALACE - COURTYARD - DAY

Pole walks down the colonnade.

POLE
Re-load!

142
INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - AUDIENCE CHAMBER - DAY

Elizabeth heads for the window just as a door behind her SLAMS open, and Robert Cecil hurries in with a dozen guards.

ROBERT CECIL
Majesty! You must away! Essex is in armed revolt! He’s come to usurp you!

ELIZABETH
(confused)
Essex? I-- Edward is--

She seems like a confused old woman.
ROBERT CECIL
You must flee! Quickly! Majesty! He means to kill you and take your throne for himself!

It takes only an instant for that to sink in. She looks enraged. And then she turns with a flurry, and heads back the way she came. The guards that were with Robert Cecil follow her.

143
EXT. WHITEHALL PALACE - COURTYARD - DAY

Another fusillade is SHOT, and more of Essex’s men go down.

And then doors OPEN on the ground floor, and guards RUSH out to take down the survivors.

Essex and Southampton valiantly fight, but there’s just too many.

They’re soon surrounded... And Essex, knowing all is lost, raises his sword in defeat.

Southampton sees this, and does the same.

144
INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Oxford watches all of this through the window.

ROBERT CECIL (O.S.)
She won’t forgive him this, Edward.

Oxford turns, devastated.

ROBERT CECIL (CONT’D)
Essex will be convicted and executed for treason.
(beat)
As will your son.

Oxford looks shocked.

ROBERT CECIL (CONT’D)
(smiles)
What? Didn’t you think I knew? Of course I knew, Edward. My father told me all his secrets. All of them.
(smiling)
Though the most fascinating was not made known to me until after his death.

(MORE)
ROBERT CECIL (CONT’D)
He hated you, Edward, how he hated you. And yet he married his only daughter to you. I never knew why, until I read his last letter to me.

OXFORD
He wanted his grandson to be an Earl.

ROBERT CECIL
No, Edward. He wanted his grandson to be a king.

Oxford now looks confused.

ROBERT CECIL (CONT’D)
Elizabeth had several children, Edward, not just yours. She was sixteen for the first. Bloody Mary was still Queen, and our future Gloriana was out of favor. No one thought her very important at all. Except my father, of course. And when her first child was born, a male, my father took it, and hid it. The grandson of Henry VIII, the foundling of course had to be reared a nobleman. John De Vere, the previous Earl of Oxford, agreed to accept the task.

Oxford goes ashen.

OXFORD
You lie...

ROBERT CECIL
Do I?

(beat)
Why do you think he worked so hard to become your guardian after your father died? He had it all planned years in advance. He would teach you everything he knew about statecraft, marry his daughter, and, after Elizabeth’s death, proclaim you heir. His own grandchild to follow you on the throne. But he couldn’t possibly predict what kind of failure you would become. How you would fail in politics, ignore your estates to the point of bankruptcy, all to write...

(sneers)
Poetry.

(beat)
Or that you would commit incest.

(MORE)
Delicious isn’t it? Right out of a Greek tragedy.

Elizabeth would never have--

What? Slept with her son? 

I don’t think she ever knew, to tell you the truth. Though you never know with the Tudors. They all have had such strange tastes in bed-fellows.

You could have been a king, Edward. And your son after you. Except for the fact that... you were you.

It’s raining, hard.

Oxford almost stumbles out of the building onto the now empty courtyard. The remains of the battle are still visible. Wounded, screaming horses struggle to stand...

Oxford’s a shell-- devoid of emotion. Broken. Hardly alive at all. He drops to his knees, the rain pouring down on him.

We see the silhouette of a man watching through a window from the second story above. It’s--

--Robert Cecil, a slight smile on his face.

Pole approaches him from behind. Robert Cecil doesn’t turn or acknowledge Pole, but speaks to him as he stares at Oxford.

I want a fair trial for Southampton... Evidence, witnesses, no false confessions. It must be above reproach. Though with a guilty verdict of course. Oh, and Pole--

If there is any mention of that play--

(MORE)
--Make certain the secretaries refer to it as Richard the Second. There will be no mention of hunchbacks in the official record...

CUT TO:

146 EXT. OXFORD STONE - GARDEN - DAY

Oxford is sitting in a chair, watching the river Thames, alone. Snow is falling and Oxford is covered in a thick blanket. He looks ill.

Anne walks up behind him.

ANNE

Sentence has been passed.

Oxford looks over at her. Anne smiles. This news gives her great pleasure.

ANNE (CONT’D)

They are to be beheaded.

(with venom)

Both of them. Essex tomorrow, Southampton in a week.

(beat)

Your son is going to be killed, Edward. By his own mother. Put that in one of your plays!

And she leaves him with that.

147 EXT. THE TOWER OF LONDON - COURTYARD - DAY

Essex-- dressed in black, but with a bright red waistcoat-- is led up a scaffold by guards, his hands bound behind him.

Snow covers the courtyard. There are only a few witnesses, as befitting Essex’s rank.

ESSEX

stands, looking at life one last time. The Executioner approaches with an axe. Essex turns, realizing it is time.

ESSEX

Strike true.

He kneels, resting his head on a wooden bench.
ESSEX (CONT’D)

God save the Queen!

And BAM! Just as the axe lands we--

CUT TO:

FROM A WINDOW

we see the body of Essex fall onto the scaffolding, his head into a basket. We are:

148 INT. THE TOWER OF LONDON - A CELL - DAY

Southampton, a prisoner, is watching his future fate from a room high in a tower.

DISSOLVE TO:

BOOTS

as they walk, limping along tiled floors. We are:

149 INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - AUDIENCE CHAMBER - DAY

Doors fly open and Oxford appears before Elizabeth, who is on her throne, regal and all in white, surrounded by courtiers, including Robert Cecil. But she looks very old, very ill.

Everyone goes silent as Oxford approaches Elizabeth. Oxford makes no notice of them. He bows deeply in front of her.

ELIZABETH

Leave us. All of you.

People start to exit. But not Robert Cecil.

ROBERT CECIL

Majesty, I--

ELIZABETH

Leave us!

Cecil exits, obviously worried. When they are alone:

ELIZABETH (CONT’D)

You look old...

Oxford smiles sadly.
OXFORD
I thank your majesty for seeing me.

ELIZABETH
You cannot have him.

OXFORD
He is our son.

ELIZABETH
Who did commit High Treason!

OXFORD
They only wished for a place in government equal to their station. Equal to their birth.

ELIZABETH
You caused this! Your play, your words, caused my people to mob against me! Do you think I wasn’t aware of your plot with this man Shakespeare, that I wouldn’t recognize your voice? It should be your head on the block next week, not Southampton’s!

Oxford kneels.

OXFORD
Then take my head. In our son’s stead.

Elizabeth turns away from him, angered. She walks to a window, turns her back on him.

OXFORD (CONT’D)
Neither they nor I ever conspired against you. Cecil alone was our aim. He has corrupted your--

ELIZABETH
Cecil? He has kept me my throne!
(beat)
Mary, Queen of Scots... Philip, King of Spain... Four French Louis’s... Eight Popes-- they all wanted my head. My throne. All of them!
(beat)
Yet here I remain... Because of the Cecils.

OXFORD
We would have protected you--
ELIZABETH
You would have protected me? You? My “loyal” Earls?
(snarls)
You think Essex and Southampton were the first to conspire against me, to try to take my throne? No!
(beat)
Only the Cecils could I trust!
Commoners! They could never claim my throne. Never! Their wealth, their power, their survival, all depended on me. Me and no other!

A long beat before--

OXFORD
Let our child live...

ELIZABETH
(furious)
All Englishmen are my children!

She has a coughing fit. Oxford patiently waits until she has recovered. Finally...

ELIZABETH (CONT’D)
Does he know?

Oxford shakes his head.

ELIZABETH (CONT’D)
And if I give him to you?

OXFORD
He will never learn of it from me.

She pauses for a long moment... And then she decides.

ELIZABETH
He must never know... Never.
(beat)
Take him.

Oxford dares to smile, relieved.

OXFORD
But only after my death! Only then! When all is complete. After James is crowned king, his crown safe, only then can you claim your son... our son.
(beat)
This Island will be whole.
(MORE)
One Island, one kingdom, one King.
(with disgust)
Scotsman though he be.
(beat)
That, that will be my final gift to my people.
(beat)
And I shall remain pure... Un-taken!

Elizabeth again looks out a window.

ELIZABETH
Treason... that is all that has come from you... your son... Your plays...
None will be claimed by you. None.

And she leaves the throne chamber. Oxford looks after her as the SOUNDS of BELLS slowly begin GONGING as we--

Dissolve To:

150  EXT. LONDON - DAY

The bell-ringing comes from St. Paul’s Cathedral, the largest church in the City.

Cut To:

151  EXT. THE THAMES RIVER - DAY

On the frozen river Thames we see the funeral procession for the greatest Queen England has ever seen. Everybody follows the carriage with the casket of the queen.

All the lords and ladies of the land. All wear elaborate black clothing.


He is a statue. Devoid of emotion. And then joyous CHORAL MUSIC replaces the CHURCH GONGS as we--

Cut To:

A GOLD CROWN

as it is placed on a head. We are:
INT. WESTMINSTER ABBEY - DAY

JAMES I (late 30’s) is being crowned by the Archbishop. All the lords and ladies of the land are standing in attendance.

ROBERT CECIL

is watching James. His face betrays his proud feelings. All of Robert Cecil’s desires have come true.

Oxford’s wife Anne is there, but Oxford is nowhere to be seen.

ARCHBISHOP (O.S.)
God save the King!

EVERYONE IN THE ABBEY
God save the King!

CUT TO:

EXT. STREET IN FRONT OF TOWER OF LONDON - DAY

It’s foggy. Oxford stands next to a carriage, waiting as the gates open, and Southampton-- scruffy and a bit worse for wear-- is escorted out.

Southampton smiles weakly when he sees Oxford waiting for him. The two men walk towards each other and embrace.

Both men have tears in their eyes.

SHAKESPEARE (O.S.)
No, no, no, no.

CUT TO:

INT. THE GLOBE THEATER - DAY

Shakespeare is on stage, supervising a rehearsal of “Much Ado About Nothing”. He doesn’t look pleased.

SHAKESPEARE
The line won’t get a laugh that way.
You must accent the word sirrah--

JONSON (O.S.)
Will! Will Shakespeare!
Shakespeare turns and sees Jonson heading his way. Jonson is completely drunk, waving a sword in one hand, a tankard in another.

JONSON (CONT’D)
So! Off to the palace are you?

Shakespeare immediately sees Jonson’s condition.

SHAKESPEARE
Ben!

JONSON
A command performance for our new king! Even in bloody Scotland they’ve heard of bloody Will Shakespeare, have they? Fraud. Charlatan. Counterfeiter of wit! Murderer!

The actors on stage are all watching, nervous.

SHAKESPEARE
Ben, please...

But Jonson CHARGES Shakespeare. Shakespeare easily dodges the drunk Jonson. Jonson ROARS and attacks again.

Shakespeare dodges again, turns, and manages to grab Jonson by the throat. They are face to face.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT’D)
You came to me, Ben. You came to me!

They stare at each other and then Shakespeare SHOVES him off. Jonson falls to the ground.

CUT TO:

EXT. OUTSIDE THE GLOBE THEATER - LATE AFTERNOON

Jonson—only semi conscious—is carried by the actors and dumped into the street. They leave him there. He wallows in the mud for a beat. Then--

SERVANT (O.C.)
Master Jonson?

Jonson looks up to see one of Oxford’s servants standing above him.
The servant guides Jonson towards Oxford’s bedroom just as Anne and a DOCTOR emerge from it. She recognizes him.

ANNE (to servant)
What is this man doing in my house?

The servant doesn’t know what to say.

ANNE (CONT’D)
(to Jonson)
You will leave at once. My husband is quite ill--

JONSON
It was your husband who sent for me, madam.

ANNE
And I am dismissing you--

A SECOND DOCTOR exits the sick man’s room.

SECOND DOCTOR
Are you Jonson?

Jonson nods.

SECOND DOCTOR (CONT’D)
He’s asking for you.

JONSON
Excuse me, your grace.

CUT TO:

Oxford, in bed, looks quite ill, sweat covering his brow.

He furiously writes on a small tablet on his lap. He holds up his hand for silence as Jonson enters, the doctor following behind him.

OXFORD
Thank you, doctor.

The doctor exits.
OXFORD (CONT’D)
Come over here, Jonson...

He points to a chair by the bed. When Jonson sits down he notices a big pile of manuscripts by the side of the bed.

OXFORD (CONT’D)
Did you know, Jonson, that my family can trace its peerage farther back than any family in the kingdom? We fought at Crecy. At Bosworth Field. At Agincourt.
(beat)
I inherited my Earldom as one of the wealthiest men ever to breathe English air... and at last breath, I shall be one of the poorest.

Jonson looks on sadly.

OXFORD (CONT’D)
Never a voice in government. Never a sword raised in glorious battle. No immortal deeds for my heirs to know me by.
(beat)
Words, merely words, are to be my legacy...
(beat)
You alone watch my plays and know them as mine. When I hear the applause, the cheering, of the audience, all those hands clapping, they are celebrating... another man. But in that cacophony of sounds, I strained to hear the sound of two hands only. Yours.
(beat)
But heard them, I never did.

Jonson stares at him.

OXFORD (CONT’D)
Death takes away all pretense and demands honesty from its target. You, you have never told me... never told me what you thought of my work...

To answer is not an easy task for Jonson’s ego. He hesitates.
JONSON
(almost a whisper)
I find... your words... the most wondrous ever heard on our stage. On any stage... Ever.

The two men now looking each other in the eye.

JONSON (CONT’D)
(sotto)
You are the soul of the age...

Oxford smiles at the thought of it. Then--

OXFORD
Promise me... promise me, Jonson, that you will keep our secret safe. That you won’t expose Shakespeare...

JONSON
My lord?

OXFORD
I have seen it in your face... He vexes you. How could he not? But he is not your burden. He is mine.

Then he nods to the manuscripts by his side.

OXFORD (CONT’D)
All my writings. The plays, the sonnets... Keep them safe. Keep them from my family. From the Cecil’s. Wait a few years, and then, publish them.

Jonson looks stricken.

JONSON
I am not worthy of this charge, my lord. I... I betrayed you... I told them of your--

OXFORD
I have made it my life to know the character of men, Jonson. I know you. You may have betrayed me, but you will never betray my words...

He puts the last manuscript on the pile.

Jonson looks at the--
FRONT PAGE

Which reads “DEDICATION”, then more words, starting with:

“To the Earl of Southampton”

INT. OXFORD STONE - OUTSIDE OXFORD’S BEDROOM - DUSK

Jonson leaves Oxford’s room, visibly shaken. The manuscripts are under his arm.

Anne, Oxford’s wife is still there, surround by doctors.

Then she sees Jonson leaving.

ANNE
Get out! You, your friends, your blasphemous theaters, have brought nothing but ruin and dishonor to this family.

JONSON
Ruin? Dishonor? Madam. You, your family, me, even Elizabeth herself shall be remembered solely because we had the honor to live whilst your husband put ink to paper.

He turns and exits.

CUT TO:

EXT. OXFORD STONE - DUSK

Jonson exits the building and walks away. He reads the dedication on the first page of the manuscript as he walks.

JONSON (V.O.)
To the Earl of Southampton. The love I dedicate to your lordship is without end; whereof this pamphlet, without beginning, is but a superfluous moiety.

Jonson freezes, and looks back at Oxford’s house, realizing there is another whole layer to all this; exactly what he can only guess.

CUT TO:
A few hours later. Oxford has died in his bed. Anne watches as a doctor covers his face with a sheet.

**JONSON (V.O.)**
What I have done is yours; what I have to do is yours; being part in all I have, devoted, yours.

A casket is being interred into the family mausoleum. Anne is there, as are Oxford’s children. So is Robert Cecil.

**JONSON (V.O.)**
Were my worth greater, my duty would show greater; meantime, as it is, it is bound to your lordship, to whom I wish long life... still lengthened with all happiness.

Southampton is there as well. Watching. Tears roll down his cheeks.

**CUT TO:**

Where we began.

A bucket of water is DUMPED on Jonson. He regains consciousness and looks around. Somewhat confused he sees:

Robert Cecil limping out of the dark towards him. Robert Cecil leans down, and very close to his ear, whispers:

**CECIL**
I can make all this go away, Jonson... To be but a dream. Like one of your plays... Or, I can bring you so much pain-- pain that were you given a thousand years, and a thousand quills, you could never justly describe...

Cecil steps back.
CECIL (CONT’D)
I know you have them. All his manuscripts. My sister saw you leave Oxford Stone with them under your arm.

Jonson takes a long time before answering. Will he betray Oxford?

JONSON
They were destroyed... burned... by your own men...

Cecil doesn’t know whether to believe him or not.

INTERROGATOR
He’s lying...

JONSON
My lord? Why would I lie? Is there a man alive who has reason to hate him more than I?

Jonson stares directly at Cecil, knowing he is speaking about Cecil as well as himself.

JONSON (CONT’D)
He was something I could never be. An undeniable perfection... that plagued my soul... And to him I was... nothing. A messenger. Nothing more.

Cecil stares into his eyes for a long moment, searching for the truth. Then he smiles.

CECIL
Let him go! He tells the truth.

Robert Cecil turns to leave, but then turns a last time.

CECIL (CONT’D)
And Jonson-- better him, won’t you? Wipe his memory for all time. For you. And for me.

Robert Cecil smiles at Jonson, who can only stare at him. Finally:

JONSON
(sotto)
I am afraid that this is not possible, my lord.

Robert Cecil’s smile freezes and he leaves.
163 EXT. STREET IN FRONT OF TOWER OF LONDON - DAWN

Jonson is getting released. He walks away...a lonely figure.

164 EXT. THE ROSE THEATER - DAWN

Wide from above...Still smoking from the fire....All the sudden we make out Jonson searching through the rubble.

164A INT. WHITEHALL PALACE - AUDIENCE CHAMBER - NIGHT

Set for a Court performance of a play. Courtiers bow as King James I enters the chamber, Robert Cecil two steps behind him. James takes his seat right in front of the stage, as Elizabeth used to.

164B EXT. THE ROSE THEATER - DAWN

Jonson’s eyes search the ground. And, eventually, he finds it--

THE METAL BOX

that seems to somehow have survived the conflagration.

JONSON

opens the box.

INSIDE THE BOX

Are the manuscripts Oxford gave him. Jonson smiles, relieved. They are singed at the edges, but they are there. We hear--

PROLOGUE (O.S.)
O-- for a muse of fire... that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention...

DISSOLVE TO:

AN ACTOR

playing Prologue. He is the same actor who introduced the “play” at the beginning of the film. But now he wears Elizabethan clothing-- but again, all monochromatic and grey.
PROLOGUE (CONT’D)
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act, and monarchs to behold the swelling scene!

INT. WHITEHALL PALACE – AUDIENCE CHAMBER – NIGHT
And he is standing on the stage.

PROLOGUE
Let us, ciphers to this great accompt, on your imaginary forces work.

King James’ watches enthusiastically, Robert Cecil right next to him.

JAMES I
We had seen some of this Shakespeare’s plays in Edinburgh, Sir Robert. I must tell you, we enjoyed them immensely, and look forward to seeing many more, now that we are in London... I presume you are as avid a theater man as myself?

Robert Cecil’s smile remains frozen.

ROBERT CECIL
Of course, your majesty...

The CAMERA moves away from them and we realize we are on the theater stage where we started.

INT. BROADWAY THEATER – STAGE – DUSK
“Prologue” turns and addresses his audience (and us) in the modern theater.

PROLOGUE
Robert Cecil remained the most powerful man in the Court of King James, though he could not prevent the public theaters from becoming ever more popular. William Shakespeare, however, spent the remaining years of his life not in the playhouses of London, but in the small town of his birth, Stratford upon Avon, as a businessman and grain merchant.

(MORE)
Ben Jonson succeeded in his desire to be the most celebrated playwright of his time, becoming England’s first Poet Laureate. And in 1623, he wrote the dedication to the collected works of the man we call William Shakespeare.

(beat)
And so... though our story is finished, our poet’s is not. For his monument is ever-living, made not of stone but of verse, and it shall be remembered... as long as words are made of breath and breath of life.

The curtains close.

END CREDITS start to roll...

FADE OUT.