



Elizabethan drama in five acts

*The strange case of Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare,
as it could have taken place, which is difficult to disprove,*

by Christian Lanciai (*in Swedish 1998, translated 2018*)

Dramatis Personae:

Nicholas Skeres
Ingram Frizer
Francis Archer, a sailor
Eleanor Bull
Sir Thomas Walsingham
Robert Poley
William Danby, the Queen's coroner
A priest
Christopher Marlowe

Toby, a servant
William Stanley, sixth earl of Derby
Queen Elizabeth of England
Richard Hesketh, catholic agent
Ferdinando Stanley, fifth earl of Derby
William Stanley II, his cousin
William Shakespeare
Lady Audrey Walsingham
Sir Walter Raleigh
Thomas Kyd
Thomas Thorpe
Henry Wriothesley, earl of Southampton
Robert Devereux, earl of Essex
Edward de Vere, earl of Oxford
Lady Elizabeth Stanley, his daughter
Ben Jonson
King Henry IV of France
King James I
His Queen
Sir Robert Cecil
A prison guard
An inebriated guest
An usher
Sir Francis Bacon

Wedding guests
Pub customers
Actors
An audience

The action is in England 1593-1613
and at Henry IV:s court in France.

The drama is a developed elucidation of the theory expressed in Calvin Hoffman's "*The Man who was Shakespeare*" published in 1955, a work of originally more than 700 pages, but only some hundred were ever published. The drama will have a sequel called "*The Ghost Writer*", which will deal further with Bacon, Oxford and Raleigh.

"Mind you, it is only a play."

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The Plot

Act I scene 1.

Nicholas Skeres What the hell are we doing here?

Ingram Frizer Shut up! We are here on business!

Skeres But what the hell for?

Frizer Shut up! It must be important since the old man orders it!

Skeres I wish he would sometime do his job himself. We are damned to be his slaves!

Frizer Shut up! He has influence, and he gives us money! And what he asks is never impossible! We are businessmen and want to live, don't we?

Skeres Yes, you'll do just anything for some daily bread!

Frizer There's one! What about him?

Skeres He looks good enough. He will do as well as another.

Frizer He looks like a fish out of water, hardly any family type, will probably go back to sea at once after one night's revelry ashore, don't you think?

Skeres Could be.

Frizer (*addressing the wild sailor*) Hey, chum! How is it?

Sailor Thanks for asking. There's nothing wrong I guess.

Skeres What about a drink over there at the pub?

Sailor Can't you drink for yourselves? I was heading elsewhere.

Frizer Home to wife and kids?

Sailor What I need is a dame for tonight.

Skeres No home?

Sailor Not yet for tonight.

Frizer We might get you a place for tonight, with a nice hostess. And you might even make some money on it.

Sailor Some work?

Frizer Easy work.

Sailor Well paid?

Frizer Of course!

Sailor Honest?

Frizer Of course!

Sailor All right then! What are we waiting for?

Skeres That's the spirit! Be our guest!

(*Frizer and Skeres cordially take care of the sailor and lead him on to Eleanor Bull's place.*)

Sailor But this is no pub.

Frizer No, it's even better. It's Mistress Bull's house, and she invites us for drinks.

Sailor You seem to know about these places.

Skeres Wouldn't Mrs Bull be exactly what you need after your journey?

Sailor (*with a twinkle*) A sailor ashore will never refuse a woman.

Skeres That's the spirit! (*gives him a friendly nudge in the back*)

Sailor But why are you so friendly? What have I done to deserve it?

Skeres We found none better.

Walsingham He will do. What is your name, my good man?

Sailor Francis Archer.

Walsingham A good name. Welcome to the club, Mr Archer.

Sailor What sort of a club is it?

Skeres It has many names. Kit has sometimes called it the School of Night.

Sailor Kit?

Frizer The fellow you will help out.

Sailor How?

Walsingham Enough talk. Get to the point.

Poley I am ready.

Skeres Shouldn't we have a drink first?

Walsingham Please yourselves. I am leaving. You know what you have to do.
(*gets up and leaves*)

Sailor Doesn't it all seem somewhat odd?

Poley You will understand it all right when the time comes, my friend.

Bull (*arriving with a new bottle and two new mugs, fills up the others as well*)
Where did our gentleman go?

Poley He rode home. He will not be back.

Sailor Who was the fine gentleman?

Skeres You shouldn't ask any questions, chum. The less you know, the better.

Frizer Get out now, Mrs Bull! We will get down to business.

Bull Of course. (*leaves*)

Sailor I am ready.

Poley Ready for what?

Sailor For learning my mission.

Skeres We are also ready.

Poley What are we waiting for?

Frizer Another glass. (*empties his mug*)

Skeres Are you a coward, Ingram? (*empties his mug*)

Poley You had time enough to drink before. Get going!

Frizer It's easier if our friend here first makes himself well at home. You'll need more sack, my friend. (*fills up the sailor's mug.*)

Sailor You really spoil me.

Frizer That's our intention.

Sailor I just hope I don't get too drunk to work. But that's up to your reckoning.

Frizer Yes, the moment of reckoning is approaching.

Poley Will you just go on drinking and never start acting?

Skeres He is right, Poley. We must first entertain our friend well enough, so that he will get satisfied enough with us and all eternity.

Frizer Drink, my friend! (*toasts the sailor*)

Sailor I understand less and less. (*drinks*)

Poley If you intend to drink him under the table, it could take all day and all night. Sailors can take any quantity.

Sailor (somewhat muddled) I happen to have fasted all day. I am happy drinking.

Frizer This is working out well. Have your fill, my friend, which will only make it easier for you later.

Skeres He knows what he is doing, Bob.

Poley I can't wait here all day. Do it now!

Skeres Don't press us, Bob.

Frizer We must take it easy, Robbie. Frank hasn't finished drinking yet.

Poley I had better drink myself, then. This seems to take some time.

Skeres That's right, Bob! Relax!

Sailor I had better learn what I am supposed to do before everything fades out.

Poley He is fading out.

Skeres He is happy, Ingram. Get going.

Frizer Just take it easy, and we'll do it swiftly without pains!

Sailor Imagine getting into such good company! Here I am invited to the best sack for free, to make me feel like a prince! And you haven't even told me yet what I am to do.

Poley Shall I tell him the story?

Skeres Do it, Robbie. You can make it short.

Poley There is a plague in London, old boy, and Kit must not leave the town.

Sailor Why must not Kit leave the town?

Poley Because he is arrested but free on bail. But he must not leave the town.

Sailor Tell me more.

Poley That means only one thing. He will be executed.

Sailor What did he do?

Poley He has been reported for atheism and coining. A friend betrayed him on the rack.

Sailor And what do you want me to do? Set him free?

Poley (rising) No, my friend. You are needed for something higher.
(pulls his sword. The other two do the same.)

Sailor What is this? I don't get it. (empties his mug in alarm)

Poley You don't have to.

Frizer Yes, empty your cup, my friend. You have a long journey ahead.

Sailor But what is the meaning?

Poley We need your body.

Sailor My body?

Frizer Instead of Kit's.

Skeres Stop talking and start acting! (Skeres and Frizer strike at the sailor)

Sailor (mortally wounded) Why me?

Poley We have no time to answer that now. (pierces him to death. The sailor dies.)

Frizer At least we gave him enough to drink.

Skeres It's done. What do we do now?

Poley Now we'll just have to wait. Ingram, get yourself a few cuts in your head, and it will look better.

Frizer Isn't it enough with one person dead?

Poley Do as I say!

Skeres I'll fix it. Stand still, Ingram. (*gives Ingram two slight wounds in his front*) Now you have been in a brawl and was forced to defend yourself and kill our friend in self defence.

Poley And the body must be buried quickly, as there is a plague in town. Is the cart ready outside?

Frizer The grave is also dug and ready.

Poley All according to plans.

Bull (*enters with another tray*) More drinks, gentlemen?

Skeres That's just what we need. (*grabs a mug*)

Frizer Don't drink too much, Nicky. It isn't over yet.

Bull But what a mess you have made of it! This place hasn't looked like this since they cut up Bill Fountain.

Frizer Was it long ago?

Bull It was ages ago, last year.

Poley Mistress Bull is used to most things. Why do you think we chose this place?

Bull He is all messed up in his face!

Poley Let him be. It will make things easier for the coroner.

Skeres When will he come?

Poley As soon as the coast is clear. We'll just sit here and wait in the meantime.

Bull (*offers him a mug*) It's on the house.

Poley (*drinks it all up in silence*)

Skeres (*looking out through the window*) He is here!

Poley Good!

Walsingham (*returns*) Is it done?

Poley He is stone dead.

Walsingham (*enters, shuts the door, inspects the body with his arms crossed*)

So there you are, Kit, stone dead and insured against eternity! No one can touch you any more, for the dead may haunt the living, but no living person will freely seek a quarrel with someone dead. You've done a great job, boys! You have totally ruined his face. No one could see that this ruined carcass is not Christopher Marlowe. I couldn't have done it better myself. The thing is settled. I will go and fetch the coroner. (*leaves again in haste*)

Bull (*delighted*) This is the best murder to my experience!

Poley It will make a page in history.

Bull (*looks at the body*) So this is Kit Marlowe, who struck terror in all London and made all England quake and the whole establishment shiver! What a fine end product the greatest boaster on stage has made! Is it true that he wanted to abolish the whole Bible?

Poley No. He just wanted to rewrite it.

Bull He wrote better stuff himself. He could have carried on doing that instead of lying here.

Poley That's what he can do now. This is only a beginning. Now he can start writing real plays. But mark well: We know nothing about it. For our part, it is Kit Marlowe lying here on the table unhappily killed in self defence by our friend Ingram here, who had to defend his life when he was attacked from behind by Kit.

Frizer We have done a great service to the world. Now at last Kit may start working without being disturbed.

Poley But we know nothing about it.

Skeres (looks out through the window) Here they come.

(enter Walsingham together with coroner Danby)

Walsingham A most unfortunate incident, Mr Danby. And that it should happen here and in the house of a respectable lady!

Danby Good luck for you that I was in the vicinity. Or else there would have been a problem.

Walsingham You are thinking of the plague?

Danby Partly that, and corpses will rot easily at this time of the year. *(sees the body)* So this is the carcass. What a sorry sight!

Frizer (reporting) I was the one who did it. As you see, I haven't run away from the crime but plead guilty.

Danby Of course. Sir Thomas, I will take care of the rest myself. You have never been here. Understood?

Walsingham Do you understand, boys? I have never been here.

The three assassins Understood!

Bull And I have never seen you in my whole life, Sir Thomas!

Walsingham You will all have your rewards. *(leaves)*

Danby You understand that I have to write a detailed report? *(brings out documents)*

Poley Of course.

Danby So. Let's get it over with. Let's start with the names. Your names, gentlemen?

Skeres Nicholas Skeres.

Poley Robert Poley.

Frizer Ingram Frizer. I was the one who did it.

Danby I know. You were attacked from behind by Kit as you sat by the table with your backs turned on him, as he *(looking around)* lay there on the bench. I see that he has sorely wounded you, Mr Frizer. Of course you had to defend yourself, and then unfortunately you happened to strike the outstanding poet to death. Bad luck, gentlemen! Shit happens! And here is the body. I can see exactly what has happened. Here is the mortal wound that has struck him straight in the eye and entered his head by some inches. The cut is one inch in breadth and has passed two inches into the brain. That sounds good! It's all settled! Mortally wounded with instant death! It couldn't have been more perfectly arranged! You have done well, gentlemen. All we need now is sixteen witnesses.

Bull (dismayed) Aren't we enough?

Danby Don't worry, Madame! We will fix the sixteen witnesses tomorrow. Now we must get rid of the body. Or else it will start smelling and stinking, and there is a plague in town.

Poley There is a cart outside.

Danby So get the corpse to the priest at once! Saint Nicholas is only a few blocks from here. There are several empty graves. Get the corpse into one of them, and I will see to it that it gets covered up instantly. He was an atheist, so a tombstone won't be necessary.

Priest (enters) I heard something was going on here. Is this there where the regrettable incident took place?

Danby You couldn't have arrived in a better moment, reverend. We just finished the inquest.

Priest (reaching the body) So this is what remains of the great blasphemer! What an inhuman end to a human being! But then he was an atheist. What do we learn from this? May all atheists end up the same way, for a warning to all heretics in the world! Here we see the just punishment of haughtiness in supreme justice! Where are your proud ambitions now, Christopher Marlowe? You who thought you could conquer the world alone from a stage by a loose tongue, how much more expressive than all your life's work is now your horrible silence dressed in blood! I scorn you, miserable excrement of worms, like you dared to scorn the church and the Holy Writ! A bloody scrap of meat stinking worse than all your sweat is all that remains of your outrageous towering hubris! Behold the sum of your work, Christopher Marlowe, the end result of all your indecent vanity, your own bloodily ravished corpse! – Remove the carcass.

Skeres There is a cart outside.

Priest Good. Then I don't have to touch him. But you must carry him out for me.

Poley We are happy to be of service, reverend.

Priest (to Frizer) Are you the praiseworthy perpetrator? God bless you! Let me shake your hand! Congratulations!

Frizer It was a pleasure, reverend.

Poley Take a hold over there, and we'll carry out together the corpse of Kit Marlowe.

Skeres Shall I be the carrier of his head?

Poley Grab his shoulders, stupid. I assure you that his feet stink worse than the rest.

Bull A quick one for the road, reverend?

Priest No thank you, Madame. I will give a sermon tonight.

Bull Any sermon will be better with some liquor to it.

Priest Yes, but it will not do if I talk thick. Come on now! Let's scrap the atheistic bummer and heave him to the worms where he belongs! (*Skeres and Poley carry the corpse away, the priest following them.*)

Poley Easy now! Don't drop it!

Skeres Trust me, Bob!

Bull May I invite the murderer for a drink?

Frizer God knows I don't do this every day.

Danby I would suggest the contrary. It's not every day that I get such a confidential commission.

Frizer Isn't that the same thing?

Danby Only if you look to the payment.

Frizer You are the Queen's own coroner, aren't you?

Danby That's why the unfortunate incident had to happen in Deptford. It was within the verge of the Queen's own jurisdiction. An ordinary lawman would not have been as easy to instruct.

Frizer So my employer can influence the Queen's men but not the law's?

Danby Exactly. He has money, and his cousin was prime minister. Your employer is not stupid enough to let go of that influence he gained as the prime minister's cousin.

Frizer And that influence he can only maintain by keeping such knaves as me, Poley and Skeres in his employment.

Danby We are all knaves in the establishment. That's why we are established. Free minds like Kit Marlowe could never get into the establishment.

Frizer We were all witnesses to that.

Bull Cheers, my dear wicked knaves!

Frizer Cheers to the freedom of free minds! *(They drink.)*

Bull Pity only about such a good and able-bodied seaman.

Danby Mistress Bull, I can assure you, that that sailor made a contribution and was happy to sacrifice his life in the service of the crown and even in a most exceptional way. He will go down in history.

Frizer I must agree with Mrs Bull though, that it felt a little unnecessary to have to murder to produce a corpse.

Danby The problem was that we had to have a corpse fresh and healthy. It could not have been marked by the plague, for then it would not have been credible as Marlowe's. By presenting an authentic corpse, the matter can now in no way be brought into question, and that was the meaning of it. The Queen will be satisfied by Walsingham's efforts.

Frizer But couldn't we have let the hanged John Penry pass as Marlowe?

Danby With bruises around the neck from the rope he was hanged in? Mr Frizer! Do you think justice can be fooled by anything?

Frizer Mr Danby, with you as its representative I actually think so.

Danby I don't represent justice, Mr Frizer. I am the Queen's man, and she is also your employer's employer.

Frizer So we had no choice, since we had to please the Queen.

Danby And don't forget, that it's Kit Marlowe who is dead, no one else.

Frizer Cheers to the Queen. I hope she knows what she is doing.

Danby She always knows what she is doing. Therefore no one else needs to know.

(They continue poculating.)

Scene 2.

An open salon with an open fire at Scadbury Park, the Walsingham property.
Christopher Marlowe is sitting alone by the fire.

Marlowe I am dead. And yet I am alive. This is no longer reality. I am executed and exist only as a shadow. The king is dead and may only go on by ghosts. And you can bet on that that's what I will do! What phantoms and ghosts and nightmares he will haunt the centuries with! The stages will forever quake before their own Tamburlaine the Great, the invincible world ruler on stage, who had to be murdered to have his power established forever, like Jesus. Yes, I have become like the crucified myself, the new age Messiah, atheist and blasphemer and follower of platonic love as the only true and lasting way of love, like another Orpheus. Orpheus and Messiah – whatever has become of you, Christopher Marlowe, the shoemaker's son who was such a natural talent that he was sent on scholarship to study at Cambridge and learn the most dangerous and heretical writings of the most forbidden authors to be able to scourge society with? And I am still young, although I am already dead. The irony of my life is greater than the world, and I have only started. But how could I ever continue now when I am dead and deprived of everything – and most of all of my own kingdom the stage? How could I endure and survive the loss of London, my entire world? No, I can't understand my own destiny. But methinks I hear my protector coming. (*noise outside. Enter Walsingham.*)

Well, brother, how did you manage the staging of my death?

Walsingham Everything is ready. Now it's just for you to disappear.

Marlowe One last night together?

Walsingham We can't risk it. The government is watching me. Anyone could come for a visit here at any moment. A ship is waiting for you at Dover. Here are your new documents with clearance. Your new name is Francis Archer.

Marlowe Profession?

Walsingham Sailor.

Marlowe Suitable enough for a wayward poet.

Walsingham (*taking a seat*) Your new life begins now, Kit. Take it as a challenge. Either you make it and will then really become something of the new age prophet and leader, or you will not make it, perish and vanish. You must not do that. You must make it, for both our sake and for the Queen's, who sanctioned your rescue. You must succeed in proving you were right.

Marlowe I see it more like a trial to my friends.

Walsingham How do you mean?

Marlowe When they will learn that I am dead, they will all speak the truth. I always wondered about the true stand of Tom Kyd, Baines and all the others. Now I will never know, since you force me away.

Walsingham Kit, the truth is that you have no friends. They all betrayed you and especially Baines and Thomas Kyd. This was necessary only because of them.

Marlowe It was Robert Greene who started it.

Walsingham He is dead. He is out.

Marlowe But what about Baines?

Walsingham I think he was the man who wrote your death sentence.

Marlowe So if I hadn't been killed at Deptford I would surely have been executed anyway?

Walsingham Most probably, thanks to Baines. The risk was too imminent and serious to be taken. But you drove him to it, Kit. You are yourself responsible for your own destiny.

Marlowe (rising) Is it my fault that Tom Kyd was arrested and babbled under torture?

Walsingham You know what I mean, Kit. You did everything to challenge destiny. You always boasted a lack of discretion. Already at Cambridge you started preaching atheism. You challenged the establishment everywhere except on stage. You were caught for coining in Holland. You associated with sodomites and celebrated black masses with them in the forest. You wouldn't just have been executed for atheism and coining but also for homosexuality and witchcraft, the worst crimes England knows.

Marlowe Thanks, my prosecutor. Let me then plead for my defence. I never tried to conceal my vices like everyone else. I was never a hypocrite. I never told a lie. I tried everything and am not ashamed of it. I knew and learned from all kinds of people without exception. I wandered in paradise with the learned in Cambridge and sunned myself in the basking light of gods like Sir Philip Sidney and Giordano Bruno, but at the same time I never objected to the company of the worst. You yourself keep people like Frizer, Nicky Skeres and Bob Poley in your service. We both tried everything from the highest and loveliest spirituality to the lowest possible vices. Yes, I associated with satanists, witches and warlocks, but only to get to know them and understand them as characters. I was your bedpartner, Tom, but also your guardian angel. You could judge me better than anyone else.

Walsingham You are dead, Kit. That's what saves you. You were too good to live.

Marlowe Our relationship was too good to be able to last.

Walsingham You can keep it alive as a poet and give it everlasting continuity, but only if we now part for good.

Marlowe Don't get sentimental, Tom. I can't stand it.

Walsingham The same accounts for you. We are both men, Kit. Only women are sentimental, like Socrates said.

Marlowe No, it was Plato.

Walsingham The inventor of platonic love.

Marlowe He meant only friendship.

Walsingham Friendship is stronger and lasts longer than love.

Marlowe Yes, than carnal love. But spiritual love is above friendship.

Walsingham And that's platonic love, isn't it?

Marlowe Like *our* love, Tom.

(Hard knocks are heard outside.)

Walsingham Who the devil dares to come visiting us with a disturbance!

Marlowe Should I hide? (*enter a groom*)

Walsingham Who is it, Toby?

Groom Sir Thomas, by my soul I believe it is Lord Strange.

Walsingham Lord Strange? What the devil does he wish from here?

Groom I don't know, Sir.

Walsingham (*vexed*) Well, show him in.

Marlowe Who is it?

Walsingham You should know. He is the owner and leader of our greatest theatre company and has produced almost all your plays.

Marlowe Should I hide?

Walsingham No, Kit, there is no need. He might even be able to solve some of our problems.

Marlowe Hasn't he something to do with the government?

Walsingham It was his father who warned us in time, Kit, so that we could take measures. It was the old earl of Derby who first sounded the alarm at the report from your friend Baines. He warned us, not the government, for his first interest, like that of his sons, was the theatre and not politics. The government knows nothing about this. But Ferdinando could be our next king, if things turn out well.

Marlowe A solution for us?

Walsingham That's what I would like to investigate.

Groom Lord Stanley, Sir. (*presents Stanley and leaves*)

Walsingham My good lord... but this is not Lord Strange. What the devil are you doing here?

Stanley Pardon me for intruding, Sir Thomas. I was just dropping by...

Walsingham Of all unexpected guests turning up at the worst possible moment!

Marlowe Isn't it Ferdinando?

Walsingham I am sorry, Kit. This is not Lord Strange but his younger brother. Nevertheless, he also leads and owns a theatre company, although a lesser one. The theatre is all the life there is for these two brothers, isn't it, Lord Stanley? But what the hell do you want here?

Stanley I know, Sir Thomas, that you still have some influence at court.

Walsingham It was my cousin.

Stanley But to some degree you have taken it on. The Queen trusts you. She does not trust us.

Walsingham With good reasons. You are leaders of the Catholics and cousins to the Queen.

Stanley Our father was.

Walsingham And you are also related with Mary Stuart. That's why the Catholics wish to make your father king after Elizabeth, which doesn't please Elizabeth.

Stanley It doesn't please us either. That's why I am here.

Walsingham Do you then wish to betray the cause of your family?

Stanley My father isn't interested at all in the Catholic issue. On the contrary, he is a puritan. That's why the Catholics place all their hopes in my elder brother. But

like myself, his only interest is in the theatre. I really just wanted to try to interest you in conveying that to the Queen, that if my brother is asked to become the candidate of the Catholics to the throne after our Queen, he intends to decline the offer.

Walsingham That's great and vital news. You surprise me, Lord Stanley. It's not your ancestry that has stirred Queen Elizabeth. It is your strong position of power in Lancashire between Scotland and England.

Stanley I have delivered my message. Let me not intrude any more. But isn't this our famous Kit Marlowe?

Marlowe It really isn't.

Stanley I heard a rumour that you were dead.

Marlowe Already?

Stanley There are people in London claiming that you died in the plague.

Marlowe Since I haven't, perhaps you, Lord Stanley, could help us with a small problem.

Walsingham Don't say too much, Kit. We just learned that no Stanley ever will be king.

Marlowe That's why I consider him reliable. I wish to have him taken into our full confidence.

Stanley I am good at keeping secrets.

Marlowe I believe so, Lord Stanley. Perhaps you have heard that I was accused of atheism and coining?

Stanley What I know is that our poor friend Thomas Kyd was arrested for alleged participation in the Babington conspiracy and tortured and that he under torture tried to put all the blame on you.

Marlowe After that there have been more allegations so serious that I am compelled to leave the country.

Stanley I am sorry.

Marlowe If I remain I am dead. If I escape I will be outlawed for life. To give me some respite and peace to continue my work, Sir Thomas has conveniently arranged my official death. Formally I am dead from this day on, Lord Stanley. I can only carry on incognito.

Walsingham This is a state secret, Lord William. Do you understand?

Stanley I understand perfectly well. Please continue and get to the point.

Walsingham Kit will continue working, but no one must suspect that he isn't dead. All who know about it are present in this room, his official murderers, who are all in my service, and the Queen. It is imperative that no one else ever knows about it, and that we who know bury the secret in our hearts for as long as we live and keep it buried unto our graves. Are you with us?

Stanley Of course.

Walsingham The thing is, that since Kit's voice and pen can't be silenced, we need someone neutral and reliable in whose name his poetry could be published.

Stanley Only his poems?

Marlowe Also my plays, if possible. They could be presented in some other name than mine.

Stanley This is curious, because I am in the same position myself. I have written some Italian comedies that I impossibly could publish in my own name, since my family has its position. There are several others in the same dilemma, like the earl of Oxford. For our part, I think we have found the solution. And I think you could be part of the same solution, if you wish.

Walsingham Sit down, Lord Stanley, and tell us.

Stanley (takes a seat) Six years ago I returned from my extensive journeys around Europe. I then stayed at our house in Chester, where my brother's theatre company frequently gave performances. In his troupe there was a young man from Stratford, who had tired of his wife and escaped to become an actor. He looks like you, master Marlowe, and is about the same age. He is a reliable and faithful theatre man whom anyone could entrust with anything. I intend to ask him if he for a certain amount could lend his name to my and Oxford's plays. If he agrees, he could also dress your poems.

Marlowe His name?

Stanley William Shakespeare.

Marlowe Never heard of him.

Walsingham Neither did I.

Stanley Do you wish me to ask him?

Walsingham Do you think it's safe? Could he keep secrets as well as you?

Stanley I consider it perfectly safe, as he is paid for it. He is an accomplished businessman who never gives a secret income source away.

Walsingham He almost sounds like our man.

Marlowe We hardly have any choice but to trust him and you.

Stanley (rising) Good. Then the matter is settled. Pardon me for disturbing you, gentlemen.

Walsingham I am looking forward to a possible future collaboration in literature, Lord Stanley, under the code name of William Shakespeare.

Marlowe But we can't let you go without having given a solemn promise.

Stanley Well?

Marlowe You have never seen me here. Understood?

Stanley Of course I haven't been able to see Kit Marlowe here since everybody already knows that he died today. What man is that man talking about, Tom? Who is it?

Walsingham It's a wayward sailor by the name of Francis Archer.

Stanley I am glad to make your acquaintance, Mr Archer, and happy journey, wherever you are going.

Walsingham We will hear from him. He will write letters.

Stanley Many and long ones, I hope. Good evening, gentlemen! (*leaves promptly*)

Marlowe He got the whole picture at once.

Walsingham And he provided us immediately with a promising agent. It was as if he was sent here by an angel.

Marlowe He seems honest and reliable.

Walsingham He is a quiet person who never makes much of himself.

Marlowe In your first letter to me in France you must tell me all about this man Shakespeare.

Walsingham I will investigate him carefully. But he seems reliable like Lord Stanley.

Marlowe For the first time in many days I feel safe in good hands.

Walsingham You have reason to. Remember that we have committed a murder for your survival.

Marlowe Tom, you can't blame me for that. I was in no way accountable. What you did was entirely on your own responsibility. I wasn't even involved. I didn't even know about it. If you had shared your plans or asked me about it, I would have refused it.

Walsingham (darkly) That's why you were kept out of it. Nevertheless, it was a human sacrifice for your sake, to save your honour and your art and the means for you to continue working. Remember, that you yourself created the theatre of cruelty, of which this was perhaps the last risky play. And as much as we did it for you, we did it as there was no other option. It was a necessity rather than a murder.

Marlowe But it was wholly on your responsibility, and you reason like a satanist. Is my pen then an instrument of the devil? There is no power without corruption, and I will have absolutely nothing to do with that. Well, Tom, I give myself my punishment. If you have killed in my name for the sake of my poetry, then may my just punishment be that there may be nothing more written in Kit Marlowe's name.

Walsingham You are no devil, Kit. You are the divinity of the new age.

Marlowe Even worse. May that divinity in that case have no name.

Walsingham Let's satisfy ourselves with that. Happy journey, Kit. It's time for you to leave.

Marlowe That's how I feel also. We have reached some settlement and verdict. Farewell, my friend. No tears, no kisses. But if we meet again, we shall smile indeed.

Walsingham Live well, Kit, and enjoy being a poet who from now on at last may write in peace.

Marlowe I will miss my London stages. They were my kingdom, which I loved. I had only started. Shall I now leave all this and leave the rest of the world unconquered by my art?

Walsingham It's your challenge, Kit. You still have time and may succeed. The worst mishap and fate in the world can be turned to good ends.

Marlowe I hope you are right. Until I write, my friend, the rest between us will only be silence.

Walsingham Hurry on, so that you may soon be back.

Marlowe Thanks for still believing in me. That's all I need. Farewell

Walsingham Farewell, my dearest friend and most incurable and incorrigible poet. *(Kit leaves as promptly as Stanley.)*

(When he opens the door there is a flash of lightning and immediate booming thunder. In the door there is a man in a black cloak.)

(Kit is taken aback and retires almost in shock. Walsingham pulls his sword.)

Walsingham What kind of a trespassing importunity is this into my house?

Marlowe (calming down and collecting himself) Take it easy. There is no danger. It's our former guest who has returned.

Stanley (entering) I am sorry. I had no intention to startle you. This thunderstorm was really most unwelcome. I came back, because I got an idea.

Walsingham Lord Stanley?

Stanley Yes. Did you expect someone else, or worse, perhaps?

Walsingham (sheathing his sword) I expected no one at all. What idea brought you back?

Stanley Sir Thomas, it occurred to me, that our young playwright doesn't have to leave England at all.

Walsingham If he stays he will not only risk his own life but also mine and my entire future and even Sir Walter Raleigh's, whose disciple he was from the start, with all the other free-thinkers of his circle.

Stanley He would be as safe among the Catholics in the north as in France.

Walsingham Would you risk your life by taking care of him? He is the hottest controversy in England.

Stanley And he is England's number one dramatist. England cannot afford to lose him. Yes, I would protect him with my own life, and I know my brother would also. He could continue writing plays but exclusively for our theatre companies. We can stage his new plays in Chester and Lancashire and try them there before bringing them to London. I know that would please my brother, who would be most enthusiastic.

Walsingham Kit, you would then as an artist completely belong to Lord Strange's and the Lord Admiral's men.

Stanley What do you say, Kit?

Walsingham Lord Stanley, your proposition is interesting and not to be discarded or despised. It will be carefully considered by and by. But at the moment it is necessary that he disappears from England.

Stanley For how long?

Walsingham Three years at least.

Stanley And then?

Marlowe In the meanwhile and later I can write for both you and Sir Thomas.

Stanley In the meanwhile?

Walsingham His poem 'Venus and Adonis' is already finished. It can be published at once. The only problem was that it needed another signature. He also has other poems coming. And he can write plays.

Marlowe What kind of plays do you desire, Lord Stanley, the only one in England except Sir Thomas here who has cared for me as a human being?

Stanley Is there any more dramatic subject than the War of the Roses? You already started dramatising Holinshed's chronicles, Kit, by 'Edward III' and 'Edward II'.

Marlowe You are right. It's just for me to carry on. I could write the most diabolical drama thinkable about Richard III.

Stanley But no tendencies, Kit! No homosexuality on stage ever again, like in 'Edward II', and no more atheistic propaganda or attacks on the church, like in 'King John'. If you wish to continue as a dramatist although you are dead, your plays must be clinically purged from everything except what is human.

Marlowe And drama.

Stanley Of course.

Marlowe It's reasonable and fair. I agree.

Stanley You stand your best chances in the world, Kit, if you now go to France. There you can get to know women.

Marlowe They are all faithless, calculating and inconsistent. They have no word of honour. I have been to France.

Stanley Love the women anyway, Kit, even if it is only at some distance. And don't content yourself with France. Go on to Italy, get to know the Renaissance movement and culture and its writers with the modern Italian literature. There you will find the best dramatic material today. Italy is more the mother of the world today than Rome was in the Antiquity.

Marlowe I shall follow your advice. And I will later join you in Lancashire.

Stanley Do it soon. I don't think three years would be necessary, Sir Thomas. The world will soon forget all about Kit's upsetting atheistic preachings and sexual liberalism and even his murder. By the official acceptance of his murder he should be safe and immune against any kind of transgression. Since everybody knows that he is dead, it cannot be him. It's a practical impossibility that he exists, since he is confirmed dead by law. On the other hand, the world will never forget his dramatic output, and that it must never forget.

Walsingham I agree.

Stanley So let's go, Kit, out in the storm together against all future thunders and lightnings and bravely spite them together by our free spirits!

Marlowe I leave, Tom.

Walsingham You see that the world cares about you, not only I.

Marlowe And I suddenly feel in good hands.

Stanley Come, Kit! Your ship is waiting!

(They leave, Stanley covering Marlowe with his cloak.)

Walsingham He will be back with a vengeance with all his love. He is too good for the world ever to be able to lose him. Kit Marlowe is not dead. He has just been born.
(retires)

Scene 3. The Court.

Elizabeth What I can't understand is this homicide on that poet. He was our prime playwright. How could he associate with criminal murderers way out in Deptford, and how could he be killed by them? How could such a thing happen? We have no surplus of qualified playwrights, and too many of them already died far too young.

Danby Your majesty, I was not present when the incident occurred.

Elizabeth No, but you were conveniently handy afterwards. Was there nothing fishy about that company in that hospitable place?

Danby Your majesty, my only duty was to establish facts. It's all there in my report.

Elizabeth I have studied it. It makes a queer impression. The risk is that many will question it.

Danby In what way, your majesty?

Elizabeth In every way. The reckoning – how could it trigger a deadly brawl? Would that have been the motive for our greatest dramatist, a Cambridge philosopher who associated with Bruno and muses and gods, to draw his rapier to threaten the life of an oaf, a groom, a bum? And how could this oaf, this bum kill our poet behind his back? It says here that he couldn't turn around as he sat squeezed in between the two other dolts, who did nothing, as if they were paralyzed. In brief, Danby, the way this homicide is described in your report, makes it incredible and impossible.

Danby Your majesty, I was not present myself when the accidental homicide was committed. My report is founded entirely on the unfortunate killer's own confession and my investigation of the body.

Elizabeth In what condition was the body?

Danby Completely dead, your majesty.

Elizabeth Of course, you idiot, but what did it look like?

Danby All bloody.

Elizabeth The report describes a deep wound in his head. Could you see the face of the poet?

Danby No, your majesty.

Elizabeth You didn't wipe the blood off the dead man's face so that you could identify the body?

Danby Your majesty, I never saw the man in reality. Even if I had washed away the blood I could not have identified him. But they all assured me that it was Christopher Marlowe.

Elizabeth Even the sixteen witnesses, that could swear on it? Obviously they could all identify him much easier than you, although they were much simpler people than you and they even less than you ever had heard of the poet Christopher Marlowe.

Danby Your majesty, I have only done my job.

Elizabeth The deceased was not only our foremost poet. He was also a valuable spy for Sir Francis Walsingham, my late friend, my only consistently trustworthy servant. As an agent in his service the poet accomplished several important missions

for us in France and the Netherlands. How is it then possible that a servant of Sir Thomas Walsingham even by accident could have killed him and just for a petty bill?

Danby Your majesty, I am sorry if my way of handling this affair hasn't been wholly to your satisfaction.

Elizabeth That's not the issue, you fool. I would like to meet this murderer, this clout, this lurch who by accident happened to kill the most promising talent of our country, this – what was his name again?

Danby Ingram Frizer.

Elizabeth The poet killer Ingram Frizer.

Walsingham (*enters*) Your majesty, you wanted me. (*bows very deep*)

Elizabeth Sir Thomas, why was Christopher Marlowe murdered? I have reason to suspect your hand in this, since his death was caused by your servants. I happen to know that you are about to marry and that you had a relationship with Christopher Marlowe. What kind of a sordid scandalous bugger tale is this?

Walsingham Your majesty... (*indicates the presence of Danby*)

Elizabeth Get out, Danby. (*Danby bows and leaves.*)

Well, Sir Thomas!

Walsingham Your majesty, you are well familiar with the accusations against our departed friend. Thomas Kyd accused him on the rack of sodomy, atheism and coining. Two weeks ago Kit Marlowe was arrested. On May 29th we received the written accusations from Richard Baines against him of all kinds of atheism. All this should be familiar to you, your majesty.

Elizabeth I was willing to disregard them. And Kit Marlowe only coined foreign money, never English. There was no reason to have him dead.

Walsingham But he had powerful enemies that were too powerful. When he lay dead at mistress Bull's, a priest desecrated his body to scorn him after his death. And he knew himself how powerful his enemies were.

Elizabeth Were you one of them?

Walsingham Never. I was fully responsible for him as his nest friend and protector.

Elizabeth Still he was murdered by your closest servants. I can only understand it that they did it by your command.

Walsingham Your majesty, let the world think so.

Elizabeth What do you mean?

Walsingham Kit Marlowe had no friends besides me. He thought his best friend was Thomas Kyd. That man betrayed him more basely than any cursed soul could betray his benefactor, even if it was under torture. Friends don't betray each other under torture, not here in England. Even Richard Baines was a friend who betrayed him and without torture. Add two and two, your majesty. You can think. Kit Marlowe felt inexorably urged to vanish. He has obeyed the voice of his destiny and vanished.

Elizabeth So the dead man was – who was he?

Walsingham An unknown sailor without family who just wanted a slut.

Elizabeth His name?

Walsingham Francis Archer. But the lost Francis Archer has left the country.

Elizabeth I understand. Will he be back?

Walsingham In a few years at the earliest. Meanwhile his art will expand.

Elizabeth Sir Thomas, I misjudged you. You should be rewarded for having sensed my most secret wishes in this affair. It's only Danby who managed the matter clumsily with the affected conceit of his pedantic formalism, which produced this recklessly insane criminal report where nothing by closer scrutiny could possibly make sense. I hope this report never will be called to attention by posterity. But what can I do for you?

Walsingham Release and pardon my servant Ingram Frizer.

Elizabeth That will be easy. According to the report, he acted on self defence. Whose idea was it?

Walsingham His own. He learned something from the duel with William Bradley, who was killed by Thomas Watson. Watson got away with it by pleading self defence.

Elizabeth I remember. Our friend Kit has learned some intrigue.

Walsingham He will remain invaluable to England.

Elizabeth And that he shall be allowed to remain. But he is dead, Sir Thomas. Danby's report must never be questioned, and it's probably only we who know the truth who will be the only ones who ever saw through it. He is my own coroner. If this deceit ever is discovered, Sir Thomas, your own head will be at risk like my crown and England's. Do you see? Kit Marlowe is dead.

Walsingham Your majesty, I can assure you of that being the case. He is and remains dead. He has assured me of that himself.

Elizabeth That sounds comforting, to have his death certificate from his own mouth. You will understand that it was necessary for me to learn the whole truth?

Walsingham It's necessary for the welfare of the state that you know all, and I have concealed nothing of the entire intrigue.

Elizabeth It's good to know that he by his death is out of reach from our medieval torturers and that inquisitor Whitgift, and the circumstances around his death assure me that he really will remain so.

Walsingham He was himself quite clear about the necessity of that, your majesty.

Elizabeth Can I really trust you, Walsingham?

Walsingham Why couldn't you, your majesty?

Elizabeth You don't answer the queen of England by asking questions! How much can I trust you? Be specific!

Walsingham (kneels and bends his neck) Totally, your majesty. My life belongs to you and England without any reservations on my side.

Elizabeth I think you are lying. I don't think he has left England at all. Why all these lies?

Walsingham Your majesty knows, that you had no more reliable servant in the world than my cousin Sir Francis, whose total fidelity and discretion I have inherited.

Elizabeth Yes, yes, but why then do you lie?

Walsingham (rising) Your majesty, Sir Francis entrusted me with the poet's life when he passed away. If I can save his life I must do so, even if it makes some white lies inevitable even to the crown.

Elizabeth Bring the poet to me, Sir Thomas. I want to give him a mission in France.

Walsingham Your majesty, all my actions in this case have aimed exclusively at protecting him and saving his life.

Elizabeth I can see that. That's why I think I can trust you and him.

Walsingham I will bring him to you, your majesty, but absolutely incognito and on condition that it never happened.

Elizabeth Of course. We understand each other. Then I am satisfied. You may leave, Sir Thomas. *(He leaves.)*

If the world ever gets to know anything about this plot, I hope it will be long after my death.

Scene 4.

Walsingham Your majesty, I have performed my duty.

Elizabeth Is he here?

Walsingham We have brought him here.

Elizabeth (slightly on edge) Remember, Sir Thomas. This has never happened. Our meeting has never taken place. Christopher Marlowe is dead, and I have never met him. This is our only and last meeting.

Walsingham I am completely in confidence.

Elizabeth I hope you are. If a single word ever comes out about this, both you and Marlowe and everyone who knows anything about it are dead. This is my word, and I shall keep it.

Walsingham Your majesty, I have never been here today with anyone.

Elizabeth And only you and me and he knows that you never have been here today with anyone. Total secrecy. The secret is dead and buried with Kit Marlowe and will remain so until we are all dead.

Walsingham Yes, your majesty.

Elizabeth Bring in the poor boy. Then you will not stir one step from your place in the corridor until he comes out again. And I had better warn you: when I am finished with him, he will no longer be the same.

Walsingham Understood, your majesty. *(bows and leaves. Enter Marlowe.)*

Marlowe (bows respectfully and humbly as soon as he enters,) Your majesty.

Elizabeth I am not your majesty to you, Kit Marlowe. I am something much worse.

Marlowe (dares not look up) What could be worse than death?

Elizabeth There is actually something even worse than death, and under certain circumstances it is life. It is to me, and it will be to you.

Marlowe Your majesty speaks in riddles.

Elizabeth Come in here, for God's sake, boy! Is it true that you have said that you have as good a right to coin as the Queen of England?

Marlowe I am afraid that something like that might have slipped out of my mouth in improper company.

Elizabeth Very improper company! A pathetic puritan! Extremely inconsiderate and careless! That's why you are dead! And you must remain dead! Do you understand?

Marlowe I am aware of the conditions of my so called life but don't quite understand them.

Elizabeth Don't you understand anything, you bastard?

Marlowe What is it I don't understand?

Elizabeth Who was your father and mother?

Marlowe An honest shoemaker in Canterbury and his wife.

Elizabeth You were the only son among a number of sisters. Did you never feel out of place?

Marlowe Yes.

Elizabeth Were you like anyone of them?

Marlowe No.

Elizabeth Were you like your father the shoemaker or his wife?

Marlowe No.

Elizabeth Did you ever wonder why you got the best possible education?

Marlowe The Archbishop of Canterbury got his eyes on me and sent me to Cambridge.

Elizabeth You were deprived of your family for the sake of your education. And who financed your education?

Marlowe The Archbishop of Canterbury, I guess.

Elizabeth So you don't know anything about yourself. Did you never wonder who you really were?

Marlowe Life is full of wonders, and I always wondered about them all.

Elizabeth From where do you think you got your red hair? Your intelligence? Your penchant for brooding on politics? Your towering ambitions? Was your father and his wife like that?

Marlowe No.

Elizabeth Was the Archbishop of Canterbury like that?

Marlowe No. He wanted to make a theologian out of me. That's why I was sent to Cambridge.

Elizabeth That's what you thought! But you rebelled, for you wanted your life to turn your own way. That's how you became an atheist and questioned the credibility of the Bible, and your towering ambitions you gave expression by proud blasphemers like doctor Faustus and the Jew Barabas of Malta, while at the same time you associated with the boldest men of the time like Sir Philip Sidney and Sir Walter Raleigh! Did you never wonder why you were so well taken care of and found such friends and protectors in such high positions?

Marlowe I considered it a course of nature.

Elizabeth A course of nature! All doors were opened to you, and you neither wondered why or who opened them! According to the rules you should never have made your degree at Cambridge, but you had it anyway, and you never wondered by whose grace it was given you!

Marlowe I assumed it was by Sir Francis Walsingham, in whose service I was already. I did carry out certain missions for him in France...

Elizabeth My closest associate for thirty years! And why do you think he brought you into his service?

Marlowe I always wondered about his good will towards me and why he employed me.

Elizabeth At last some wondering! Well, Christopher Marlowe, let's assume that the shoemaker of Canterbury and his wife were not your real parents. Let's assume that someone gave them a bastard to take care of, a bastard of some nobility, and that they were paid well for it. Who could then your real parents have been?

Marlowe Your majesty seems to know more about me than myself.

Elizabeth Seems! Let's assume that I know everything about you. Does that seem frightening?

Marlowe No, but uncomfortable. If you do know all about it, do you intend to reveal who my real parents were?

Elizabeth On certain conditions. If you break a single one of them, you must die together with Sir Thomas Walsingham, who took care of you after the death of Sir Francis. You are the greatest state secret of England. Do you understand?

Marlowe I understand and hold my tongue and wait for my sentence, that is the condition.

Elizabeth The conditions are: never more any politics! You took the initiative yourself for a theatrical career. Follow it! You are our greatest poet. But Christopher Marlowe is dead, and he must remain dead. The secret about that name must be buried forever.

Marlowe Go on, your majesty.

Elizabeth Stop calling me your majesty! I am your mother!

Marlowe (is shattered, turns white and falls on his knees) Your majesty, it must not be true! You must be mistaken! Is this some kind of a weird practical joke, played on us by others?

Elizabeth I never practice jokes! I am not your biological mother but the more your natural mother, since your father was the only cavalier at my court whom I always loved and who never let me down, in contrast to that miserable Robert Dudley of Leicester, who turned all my ladies in waiting into whores, and his adventures almost made all England go to hell. It was the time of the great plot, when Walsingham was compelled to execute Norfolk, Arundel and several others of the leading Catholics. It was a time of great misery, and you were the great family failure of it, born as the son I could never have myself. Your father was my dearest uncle, the only respectable man in England, who rather than risk the causing of any major

upset by taking responsibility for having made one of my ladies pregnant, like all the others did and especially Dudley and Raleigh, he placed the child discreetly among his wards in Canterbury, the persecuted exiled Huguenots, who he had taken under his wings since so many of their kin in France had been martyred. It would have been the end of my establishment if it had become known that my last mother had a nephew, since no one else in our family had any children, and to protect you and your life and also your father's, all precautions were taken. We hid you from the world and sought desperately a way to both save you and get rid of you, since you would be the only child of the family! And you graciously served and helped us by your premature birth, which only that helped us to get away with it. Only Walsingham knew about it except your father, and their secrecy was the only honest discretion in the country. They smuggled you to Canterbury and found a reliable family for you. They and I have watched you since and opened all doors and ways to you until now, when you burped the unfortunate statement that you had as good a right to coin as the Queen of England. Then you had to disappear, for England's sake. Do you understand?

Marlowe (pale, still on his knees) I begin to understand...

Elizabeth Now you are already as ruined in your soul as I, but at least you will escape becoming a king.

Marlowe I never wanted anything such. I was always happy to stay out of everything.

Elizabeth You have a twin soul in the younger son of the earl of Derby, William Stanley. He is heir to the throne but also has no wish to be king. He is your only equal in the world. You are both wise, and you have the theatre in common. Stick to it. Remain a poet, Kit Marlowe, but forget your name, forget your ancestry, and write instead the world's loveliest plays and be a king forever in the better world of the theatre! That's a happier world than any kingdom, and there you could really be something of an ideal king and remain so forever.

Marlowe Your majesty, you overwhelm me. I don't think this can be true. Pardon me, but I can't grasp or accept that I would be a member of the royal family. Are you certain you are not suggesting all this just symbolically and virtually?

Elizabeth My mother was a whore who was beheaded, and I myself have always been called a bastard. You are another such bastard, illegitimate son of my uncle William Parr and would have been baptized William like he, the most prudent and talented diplomat and reconciler in England. I know it can never be proved, we made indeed certain ourselves that it never could be, your parents never learned the origin of their child and accepted it because they were childless, they were paid for the promise to keep silent at the risk of their lives if they didn't, but they loved you, and the fact that they then only had daughters endorsed and augmented their love for their only son. But since you had no idea that you could be anyone else's son until now, you also can't be considered that until from this moment. But you are like me. You have the same poetical clear view and natural inborn sense of responsibility for the world. Your plays betray that faculty. But forget this world, its politics and

miserable failed and aborted religions, which all went wrong from the beginning. Devote yourself to people instead.

Marlowe I could never stop writing plays about human nature.

Elizabeth That's the spirit. Now I recognize you. But you must learn more about the world. And you must immediately go abroad. Henry of Navarre is already expecting you. Your only contacts here at home will be Sir Thomas Walsingham and William Stanley of Derby. You will never lack funds wherever you go. Everything will be paid for you. But you must forget all about politics. Kit Marlowe, the royal clandestine bastard, can never get as good a right to coin as the Queen of England. That arrogance has already cost you your life, Christopher Marlowe. You will have a new life. Don't ruin that as well, but use it well. Your only mistake has been committed. You will not make another.

Marlowe I hear and obey, Madame.

Elizabeth This is the only time we meet. And it has never happened.

Marlowe From now on I shall be like a most obedient son.

Elizabeth Do so, and follow your destiny, for good and for worse, like I as a slave followed my own to my own bliss and ruin. The theatre includes both masks. There's your kingdom, which I give you as a better heritage than the miserable world of politics, which ruined me. And your only fortune, Christopher Marlowe, is perhaps that you are already dead.

Marlowe I shall take care of it, my mother.

Elizabeth Do so, and manage it well. You will only have it once and never again.

Marlowe (*falls on his knees, bows and retires without another word, emotionally overwhelmed, while Elizabeth already has turned her back on him. As he leaves he closes the door audibly behind him, which makes Elizabeth produce a sigh.*)

Elizabeth The only good action of my life I have now left behind. I am already dead since long, but my love lives on, and if nowhere else, at least in the theatre. (*is tired out and leaves.*)

Act II scene 1. Lathom House, Chester.

Richard Hesketh Ferdinando, we beg you not just for our own sake. It's for the sake of England and the world.

Ferdinando I am still in mourning for my father.

William Stanley II You have taken over his responsibility, cousin. You must live up to it.

Hesketh All you need to do is to raise your little finger, and all the catholic world will back you up.

Ferdinando Against the Queen? Against England? To launch this free land into a bloody civil war with no certain end to it? To turn history two centuries back in time and drench this flourishing realm in cruelty and barbarity? And you talk about responsibility?

W. Stanley Ferdinando, cousin, brother, beloved friend, your father is dead with all his abominable puritanism. What did he get for all his support to the Queen? Only mistrust and suspicion. The only ones who ever believed in you and helped you are the Catholics. Now it's your turn to meet their expectations. Give them their reward for their faithfulness. Accept the crown of England.

Ferdinando A word of this in someone else's ear could have you hanged.

W. Stanley I am prepared to take that risk. Why do you hesitate?

Hesketh Ferdinando Stanley, earl of Derby, you can't lose. The Queen has no heir and has beheaded Mary Stuart herself.

Ferdinando Her son is king of Scotland.

W. Stanley A fool, a debile poser, an illiterate imbecile, whose father we know who it was – one of Mary Stuart's many pimps. No one wants such a fake on the throne of England.

Ferdinando My brother is more appropriate than I.

W. Stanley You refuse?

Ferdinando I am sorry, gentlemen, but I can't accept your offer. My father served the Queen with honour as long as he lived. He had no reward or gratitude for that, but he did it with the greater honour. I can't fail his honour, no matter how much I sympathize with the catholic cause. I can't accept the responsibility for starting another War of the Roses under religious pretexts, which would undo everything that England has accomplished for the last hundred years.

W. Stanley Cousin, you are an idiot. You shall never see me again. (*leaves in fury*)

Hesketh We should have turned to your brother directly.

Ferdinando Richard Hesketh, I must warn you. It is my duty to report your conspiracy to the Queen. You are no longer safe in this country. Instead of seeing my brother, I advise you to leave the country at once. Or else you will be hanged.

Hesketh Ferdinando, I considered you a man of honour. Now I see that your brother was right and several other nobles with him. You are not worthy of the title earl of Derby, even less king of England. If you betray me, I warrant that your own Catholics will take revenge.

Ferdinando A religion of revenge is no religion for me. I am a Christian who believes and trusts in peace and love. You evidently don't. Please leave my house at once.

Hesketh God will have his revenge on you, Ferdinando Stanley!

Ferdinando Go to hell!

(*Hesketh withdraws towards the exit. When he opens the door, he is met by guards with halberds.*)

Guard Richard Hesketh, in the name of the Queen we must arrest you.

Hesketh (furious) Have you had eavesdropping spies behind the tapestry all the time?

Ferdinando The Queen has a constant watch on me. I can't move one step or say one word without her being notified. Guards, what about cousin Stanley?

Guard By your request, we allowed him to slip away. He is probably now already on his way to Spain.

Ferdinando May he stay there and not trouble England any more. Take this man to London. The Queen is expecting him.

Hersketh You sold your honour and future to fawn on the sow of Westminster!

Ferdinando No, my friend. I saved my family, my family honour and our future. But you and my cousin wanted to sacrifice England to catholic butchers and hangmen.

Hesketh You will regret it!

Ferdinando Take him away. He is finished here. I will not inform you of what *you* will regret, Richard Hesketh.

(The doors close on him and the guards.)

My brother, what is your part in this? By God I hope none at all. For if you took part in this conspiracy against our free England, our family is finished, for only you can keep it going. We must have some enjoyment after this. Let's have a play tonight. Master Will!

Shakespeare (rising from anonymity) At your service, my lord.

Ferdinando What plays do you have on your program?

Shakespeare Comedy, tragedy, tragical comedy or comical tragedy? Or a chronicle? We can act all the classics, as you trained us to.

Ferdinando You worked yourself well up from nothing. I want to laugh tonight. Prepare a black comedy about all the world's misery.

Shakespeare Then the tragedy of Hamlet would be most suitable.

Ferdinando That comprehensive corruption scandal from Denmark? Yes, that will do fine. It makes mincemeat of all the world's hypocrisy and morals, as is most fitting. And it suits me well, for it might be my own death I will behold.

Shakespeare (doesn't understand) My lord?

Ferdinando (claps his shoulder) Nothing. Just act your play, and don't think of how true it could be. *(leaves the hall)*

Shakespeare Actors! Make ready! Quick rehearsal for tonight's performance! It's Hamlet, Prince of Denmark!

(The actors gather around Shakespeare. Curtain.)

Scene 2. Like Act I scene 2: Scadbury Park.

Walsingham If anyone asks me what I know, I know nothing. Could I then deny what I know even to myself? I must do it in public, and thereby I must deny a part of myself, for he has hopelessly become a part of myself, the fallen poet, the doomed Lucifer, who sacrificed himself in order to survive. No, I know nothing and understand nothing, and the more I try to find my way in it, the more I get lost. He is dead, but he lives. He lives, but he is dead. What's the difference? It all comes to the same point of nothing. He has obliterated the limits of life and death, and all that is left is immortality. – Yes, what is it, my love?

Audrey (enters) Are you still brooding and grieving?

Walsingham He was my best friend.

Audrey I am now.

Walsingham No, my love. No love can outweigh true friendship. All earthly love is powerless against the love that stands above all carnal intercourse, as Kit said himself.

Audrey So I am only earthly love to you?

Walsingham You are the mother of my coming children. That also means something. At least it should mean something to you.

Audrey I know that you love me. I only wish that there was not someone dead standing between us.

Walsingham He united us.

Audrey You love him more than me.

Walsingham He loved me more than you.

Audrey You try to make a play of it.

Walsingham I try to make you see it positively.

Audrey That such a small man could have such a great influence on you!

Walsingham His soul was the greater. He was 1,67 on earth, but in his soul he is greater than all England.

Audrey That's why he couldn't remain here.

(Enter a servant.)

Servant My lord, you have a visitor.

Walsingham Who is it?

Servant Sir Walter Raleigh.

Walsingham My love, I know what he wants. Please leave me alone with him.

Audrey Is it about the murder?

Walsingham I think so.

Audrey Good. I leave you with your dead friend and his murder. *(leaves)*

Walsingham What marriage is happy? You enter it like into the most perfect delightful dream, but sooner or later you wake up with an unforgiving hangover into a hostile reality like an overwhelming reprimand. Show Sir Walter in, Toby.

(Sir Walter is shown in.)

Raleigh What is it I hear, Tom? Is it true?

Walsingham What is true?

Raleigh That Kit has been murdered?

Walsingham That should bring you joy and relief, if anyone. Now he will not be brought to trial and forced to reveal you and the entire circle of free-thinkers under torture.

Raleigh He was my finest disciple!

Walsingham As a satanist? Did he get his atheism from you?

Raleigh You know what I mean. First they said he had died in the plague. Then someone knew he had been killed at a brawl in a tavern. But no one knew anything about his grave. What sort of a plot is this, Tom? It must not be true, not him! Tell me that you saved him!

Walsingham He was in mortal danger. He was reported to the Queen of atheism and witchcraft, sodomy and coining. He had no chance, and he knew it. We solved the problem.

Raleigh Is he abroad?

Walsingham Sir Walter, I don't know if I can trust you.

Raleigh You know me. I will soon go to America. We will provide the Queen with some gold mines and things like that. I take all secrets with me and bury them in the bottomless marshes of Guyana.

Walsingham Kit needed some time out.

Raleigh So he is alive.

Walsingham He needed some relief from himself. Perhaps you remember his motto: "What gives me life consumes me." He was the most indulgent of all people. To some degree he loved himself to death. He needed some detachment from existence. The only way for him to learn who his enemies really were was to die.

Raleigh Well, he is dead now. Who were his enemies?

Walsingham All his closest friends except me. His closest associate, Thomas Kyd, who betrayed him under torture, and Richard Baines, who betrayed him without torture. They both defecated and pissed down his grave, so he robbed them of his grave.

Raleigh So they and no one else know where it is.

Walsingham They will be the last to ever learn that he lives. Tom Kyd is himself dying now by the way.

Raleigh Did he make it?

Walsingham What?

Raleigh To survive himself?

Walsingham He is writing greater plays than ever. He has found himself. He has rewritten all "Richard, Duke of York" and made his drama five times greater. He has found his humanity.

Raleigh Which he couldn't, if he had been allowed to go on as he did?

Walsingham Probably not.

Raleigh I begin to understand. But I haven't seen his name. It is deleted.

Walsingham Sir Walter, no one must even suspect that his death was only a play for the galleries.

Raleigh How many know?

Walsingham As far as I know, only very few are initiated in the secret, myself, the earl of Derby, Tom Thorpe, Essex and Southampton maybe, maybe the Bacon brothers, in that case also father and son Cecil, you, her majesty the Queen and William Shakespeare.

Raleigh Who is William Shakespeare?

Walsingham Our poet's new name.

Raleigh I understand. But didn't the earl of Derby die recently?

Walsingham Lord Strange, earl Ferdinando of Derby, knew less than his brother William Stanley, the sixth earl of Derby, who knows it all.

Raleigh Are the others reliable? The earl of Essex is an honest man, but what about the young dashing dandy Southampton?

Walsingham He is completely under the influence of Essex.

Raleigh (lower) Do you know anything about our friend Ferdinando Stanley's death?

Walsingham He was poisoned by Jesuits for refusing to accept the catholic candidature for the throne. He betrayed the leader of the Catholics to the Queen. The Catholics reacted as usual by killing the one they wanted for a king. The Catholics have no sense of humour.

Raleigh Neither have the puritans.

Walsingham No. All such fanatic rubble are just a plague to the nation, like a boil of pus, which the country only can recover from by letting it bleed to death.

Raleigh I will soon go to America. I might never come back.

Walsingham Good luck, Sir Walter.

Raleigh You don't wish to divulge where our friend Kit is at present?

Walsingham My friend, no one knows the whereabouts of his grave.

Raleigh I understand. Farewell, brother.

Walsingham You will be welcome back from America, Sir Walter. Even Kit has friends left in England. If he with such enemies still has friends, you always will as well.

Raleigh Thanks for those words, Tom. I will be back. *(leaves)*

Walsingham An honest man. He is so honest, that one day he will be rewarded for his honesty by betrayal, for honest men are too good for this world. Kit proved that once and for all. Thanks for still being alive, Kit.

(drinks a cup, toasts the fire in the fireplace.)

Scene 3. Thomas Kyd's death bed.

(Thomas Kyd lying fighting with death.)

Kyd I didn't want it myself! They forced me to it!

Thorpe Take it easy, Thomas Kyd. We know what those inquisitors are good for.

Kyd But I must know if he in the least way was behind it himself!

Thorpe Who?

Kyd Kit, of course! Kit Marlowe!

Thorpe Behind what?

Kyd That I was arrested! Who the hell reported me if it wasn't he!

Thorpe Why would he have done something like that?

Kyd Professional jealousy! We were the two most skilful dramatists! He was number one, but I stuck up and beat him! My Hieronimo beat all Kit Marlowe's heroes! I created the anti-hero!

Thorpe I know nothing of Marlowe's eventual culpability in your case, but I find it hard to believe.

Kyd I must know it! I must know it! I must know if I am to condemn him or glorify him!

Thorpe You only had some bad luck, Thomas Kyd. They caught you on the suspicion of lying behind those pamphlets against the Flemish. They therefore ransacked your house and trampled straight into your most heretical philosophical arguments.

Kyd So Kit was innocent? And I reported him?

Thorpe He loved you, Thomas Kyd.

Kyd Then I am the cursed traitor who murdered him, blind in my own envy and suspicion!

Marlowe (appearing out of the shadows) Not at all, Thomas Kyd.

Kyd Kit! You come to visit me? Am I already dead, since I see your ghost?

Marlowe You called on me. I have come.

Kyd Kit! Can you forgive me?

Marlowe Anyone can be made to say anything on the rack.

Kyd Kit! I never wanted your death!

Marlowe Who said that I am dead?

Kyd Don't tell me that you are alive!

Marlowe It's worse than that, Tom. You are dying, and I am living on, when it should have been the contrary.

Kyd But how is this miracle possible? First they all told me you had died in the plague, and then we heard that you had perished in a miserable tavern brawl. Was it all then just a play for show?

Marlowe The best performance I ever made. I didn't even have to act myself. But my disappearance from the public stage by a trap-door in the floor was most appropriate and necessary after your clumsiness.

Kyd I know. I was caught. When we both could have continued together towards ever greater heights as infernal competitors for the world scene! So you never reported me?

Marlowe I promise you, brother, that I never even dreamt of it. Morally we were together on the same side against the puritans and the hypocrisy of society. None of us had anything to gain by working against the other. On the contrary. When you no longer could back me up, I also had to fall together with you.

Kyd So you forgive me my greatness in my "Spanish Tragedy"?

Marlowe It's the greatest drama that has been written for the English stage. All my characters are butterflies against your tragic, mad, wonderful Hieronimo. No one has taught me as much as you.

Kyd Then live on, Kit, and fulfil both of us.

Marlowe You burden me with your life's work. I will manage it and carry on.

Kyd But how can you be alive? Are you not on the black list of the law? Aren't you heading Elizabeth's death list?

Marlowe Formally I am dead already. I can't be more dead, since I have a paper on it. I can't die any more. A man dies only once, and I am already dead. But I keep on working under another name.

Kyd May I ask which?

Marlowe William Shakespeare, a bloke from Stratford of the same age, who thinks he can act and ran away from his old bitter wife to the theatre to devote the rest of his life to a most needful and profitable escape from reality. He has a sense of humour and immediately grasped and accepted the joke. He has already made great money on what I write, which of course he shares with me. Haven't you read his "Venus and Adonis"?

Kyd Was it you who wrote it?

Marlowe Who else?

Kyd Didn't I hear the voice from "Hero and Leander" in the lines of "Venus and Adonis"? But it's the most popular poem in England.

Marlowe That pleases Kit Marlowe, who is dead.

Kyd But Kit, such a joke could turn bitter with time. And as long as you live you will remain in mortal danger since you should be dead. You shouldn't be in England.

Marlowe I never left England. You who know me well, Tom, must know that I never feared death, whatever I did. I have even died without succeeding, as you can see for yourself!

Kyd Still as presumptuous as ever, Kit. That's your basic character: Chronic, hopeless hubris. That made your plays.

Marlowe And by punishing myself for it there will be many more plays. I never give up, Tom Kyd, the work we started. You had a better sense of form in your division of acts than I had. I will work on that.

Kyd So we seem to have become like one in the end. But the result is neither you nor me. It turned out to be William Shakespeare.

Marlowe But he is only one. He has no competition, and since I am dead he may work entirely in peace. He has no risky political contacts like me and no burdens of the past. He is just an artist, and he is rid of me.

Kyd It's a precarious destiny you have entered on, Kit Marlowe.

Marlowe I know. It's my play of life. And I am curious about how it will end.

Kyd I die, Kit Marlowe. (*takes his hand*) Thanks for coming and giving me a final applause.

Marlowe I didn't want to miss your last line.

Kyd I am sorry that I reported you.

Marlowe I will never forgive those who accused and tortured you.

Kyd The only thing we made ourselves guilty of, Kit, was common sense – no heresy or blasphemy or atheism or paganism. We both know that.

Marlowe And so does our tutor Sir Walter Raleigh.

Kyd Farewell, Kit. I will be your protector from the other side of the grave.

Marlowe And I will be your defender to eternity. (*Thomas Kyd dies.*)

Thorpe An honest man's heart has broken.

Marlowe And what's worse – he was innocent. A splendid power of creation was in the morning of his budding creative accomplishment broken by the blind berserk violence of ruthless politics entirely without cause or reason. He was a pious philosopher who saw the best in the deepest fallen of men. Hieronimo is in his

greatness a paragon and teacher to all mankind, for which mankind now has killed him. He is the martyr of this age to its blindness, ignorance and evil – not I. He was my twin soulmate, and I am condemned to carry on but without him, without my brother, without my stage and without my identity. For I can only go on living if I am dead. (*cries*)

Thorpe Take cover, Kit. You must not be seen here. We demand that you go abroad.

Marlowe I can't give up my England. And I have powerful guardians. I don't fear for my life, Tom Thorpe, for I am dead in my heart and soul after they brought down and took the life of Tom Kyd, my only respectable colleague and master. (*Tom Thorpe leads him out.*)

Act III scene 1. Lord Stanley's wedding.

A huge banquet with sumptuously dressed up Elizabethans.

Southampton What a sumptuously capital wedding, isn't it, my lord Essex?

Essex My dear Southampton, it couldn't be more perfect. I couldn't have married better myself. The daughter of Edward de Vere, the earl of Oxford, isn't just anyone.

Southampton I wonder why the Queen isn't here.

Essex She is related with the bridegroom. She doesn't like relatives.

Southampton But surely there is nothing wrong between them?

Essex The Stanleys have always shown the crown a servile benevolence, and for each new sacrifice the house of Derby has laid down for the crown, the crown has grown more callous and suspicious, as if their majesties thought: "Another flattery to bribe us to more safely be able to knife us in the back!" But there were never any long knives with the house of Derby.

Southampton But they are Catholics?

Essex The father of the Stanley brothers was a puritan. That's why the house of Stanley sympathizes with the Catholics, which Lancashire is crowded with. But they will never be Catholics themselves.

Southampton What about their dangerous cousin William Stanley in Spain then?

Essex He is a Catholic to be sure, but he will never again become an Englishman.

Southampton How did actually the elder brother Stanley die, the former lord Stanley? There are so many rumours.

Essex He was secretly poisoned by the Jesuits. He aroused the Catholics' resentment when he refused to be their candidate for the throne and instead betrayed their conspiracy to the Queen. By that he dug his own grave. That was the latest sacrifice of the Derbys to the crown: the fifth earl of Derby deliberately sacrificed himself. Or was he only stupid? He appears to have raised some resentment already before his taking sides, and the Catholics actually wanted our bridegroom William Stanley here for their king from the start.

Southampton I think they are preparing some speech.

Essex So let's listen.

Edward de Vere (rising solemnly) My dear son-in-law, thus our families at last have been fused into one! Many thought you would never marry, the nobility had already considered you lost to the theatre forever, but then suddenly you get family fancies and want children. I hope this was not only instigated by your elder brother's so tragic and sudden death without issue.

Stanley No man can endure standing alone at length. He was made for a woman. He is fashioned by nature to beget children. Why would I then be different?

Oxford I can only assure you, that we all gave a sigh of relief when that proved not the case. And now we no longer share just our passion for the theatre but also our common affection for the same woman, my beloved daughter, your beloved wife, the mother of our children and grandchildren in common. Welcome to our family life, my dearest boy and colleague! (*embraces him. All cheer and applaud.*)

Stanley Thank you, father-in-law.

Oxford But you should know, who has remained a bachelor for so long, that woman isn't just anyone. She is not just a bag to carry around, she is no armchair for your comfort, she is no servant to command, and least of all she is calculable. And most of all: she costs money. So mind your house, and make it worthy your wife, she will not tolerate that you just waste your assets on plays, she is worth your thrift and continence, your virtue and your attention, your piety and your humility.

Stanley Surely you don't mean that I should abandon the theatre?

Oxford Everything except that, my son, everything except that! The theatre is always there waiting for you, but your wife will only be there waiting for you as long as you are good for her. That's the whole difference.

Stanley May then my father-in-law's impressive wisdom catch on to me, so that I would get wiser. Which brings me at last to call for a toast to my beloved bride Elizabeth! (*raising his glass. All share his toast with enthusiasm:*) Elizabeth and the Queen! (*all drink*)

Elizabeth de Vere (rising) Now it's my turn to say a few words. A wise wife will never stand in the way of her husband. She will choose her husband carefully, so that she can be certain that he will never let her down. It's more important that the man is calculable to the wife than the contrary. But a good wife also needs to often be left in peace from her husband. If he uses her too fastidiously, she knows that both could tire of each other. That is why I chose my husband, who not only is possessed by the greatest interest in the theatre in the country, but who also is an accomplished lawyer and scholar, devotes himself to hunting and politics, is more outdoors than indoors and more often away than at home. That gives the housewife full licence to rule at home and full care of her children. Like yourself, William, I hope to bear you many handsome sons. (*raises her glass*)

Stanley (rising enthusiastically) Well, did I choose the right wife or not?

All Cheers! Cheers!

Elizabeth and the Queen! The Queen and Elizabeth!

(*All share the general toast enthusiastically.*)

Southampton How close is actually this Stanley to the throne?

Essex Closer than he would admit. He is related both with Queen Elizabeth and Mary Stuart.

Southampton Queen Elizabeth's aunt was his grandmother. Is that it?

Essex Grandmother's mother, if I remember correctly.

Southampton And Elizabeth has no progeny.

Essex Stanley is as close to the throne as king James of Scotland.

Southampton And many would surely prefer Stanley?

Essex All outside Scotland would prefer Stanley.

Southampton So we are perhaps today guests with our next king?

Essex That's why we are here.

Southampton How does the Queen like that you are here?

Essex She doesn't like it. I challenge here and am aware of it. But she is too old for me. I can't be her golden favourite as a substitute for her lack of grandchildren. I am an independent Englishman with a life and name of my own, and she must accept it.

Southampton And if she doesn't?

Essex If she can't accept me as I am, she has the power to cut my head off, as her father did with several of his ladies. But I would rather be executed with my soul intact and free than honoured and elevated as a slave. What about you? What are your inclinations?

Southampton You know that I am devoted to you. I would rather follow your ways than the Queen's.

Stanley (approaching them) Gentlemen, you stand off from society. I hope you are not conspiring?

Essex Dear William, you know me. I never conspire unless I must.

Southampton How about your theatre company now when you must devote yourself to a wife?

Stanley You heard. They can be combined. And you are taking well care of young Will Shakespeare.

Southampton Yes, that's a completely different poet from that wild atheist who died the other year. Our man from Stratford is only compliant and accomodating, has no controversial ideas, suffers from no delusion of grandeur, is well established and married in Stratford.

Essex But didn't he run away from his shrew of a much older wife?

Southampton What do you mean by that? Rather a married poet for my protégé than a homosexual fantastic constantly carried away by his fancies.

Essex I guess it was a good thing for England to at the same time get rid of both the wild Marlowe and the garrulous Thomas Kyd. If Marlowe had lived on, he could have done anything, preach atheism from the stage, organize coining, seduce young men to chronic perversity and homosexuality, practise black magic...

Stanley Marlowe only coined Dutch money.

Essex Are you defending him?

Stanley You have no right to calumniate a dead man just because he is dead and everyone is doing it. And you, my good Henry Wriothesley, you dashing earl of Southampton, surely you could have no objection against affection between men? They say you associate with Will Shakespeare on a daily basis, giving money enough for him to buy houses and properties for.

Southampton He is worth it. His poems are delicious. And he is very good company.

Stanley Just that? (*leaves*)

Essex Of course you must know, Henry, that Will Shakespeare didn't write his poems himself?

Southampton Who says so?

Essex Those who know, the Queen among others.

Southampton Who is then his ghost writer?

Essex I wonder that as well. But a good guess is our host here today.

Southampton Lord Stanley?

Essex Put two and two together. He has journeyed all around Europe. He has an extensive education. He is a jurist and politician and incurable theatre enthusiast. He has everything that Will Shakespeare lacks. And above all: a royal relation doesn't write plays and poems. He has every reason in the world to stick to anonymity.

Southampton I could make some research and ask from where Will gets his plays and poems.

Essex No, don't let him suspect that you know. That would only hurt him. He is a theatre man. He needs his vanity.

Southampton Well then. As long as the works keep appearing we have no reason to complain.

Essex And a mystery has no need of a solution as long as everyone enjoys it.

Southampton Do you think Stanley will keep on like that all his life?

Essex He is a man of sound habits, good sense, great wisdom and best possible health. Such a man could survive all his generation.

Southampton And consequently keep such a secret?

Essex That would be most exciting to see. But I would be surprised if he ever removed his wonderful mask.

Scene 2. Behind the curtains of a theatre.

(*some actors reasoning*)

1 It's no joke, I promise!

2 If there is anything you can't trust in this world, it's the word of an actor.

1 Everybody knows that Kit Marlowe is still alive and kicking! Ask anybody!

2 Everybody knows that he is but a ghost of haunting unblestness. No wonder, ending so badly after the way he lived!

1 He was an agent in Sir Francis Walsingham's secret service, wasn't he?

2 You are right so far.

1 And he went to several missions in Holland and France, didn't he?

2 It's true.

1 Imagine that his death was arranged. Where would he be then?

2 Dead. He could never show up again alive.

1 Right – in England! But abroad he would have no problem.

2 What are you driving at?

1 Where abroad? He was a bugger, wasn't he? Where is the world's leading bugger king?

2 In France.

1 Right! And that's where he was seen close to Henry IV! He has never into safer and more loving hands!

2 So you suggest that Kit Marlowe is at the court of Henry IV?

1 Right!

2 If there is anything you can't trust in this world, it's the word of an actor.

1 Then you can't trust yourself. But I trust myself to know that what I say is right.

2 Then you are no actor.

1 Yes, when I act on stage, but this is backstage!

2 Listen. I was there at the time. I played all the roles of Kit Marlowe and Tom Kyd. Both are dead. Will Shakespeare's plays are better. Would you like a good advice? Be happy with them, stick to them, and forget Tom Kyd and Kit Marlowe. He would have said the same thing himself if he had seen our theatre today.

Jonson If Will Shakespeare has written a single one of his dramas himself, then I have written the entire Bible.

2 Are you here now again, you importunate knave? Haven't you understood that you are not welcome?

Jonson I am waiting for a verdict on my play.

1 If Will Shakespeare doesn't write his plays himself, who is doing it for him?

Jonson It doesn't matter. Anyone can write trash like that. He has probably dozens of ghost writers locked up in his wardrobe. He is just a clever businessman. That's all. (*Will Shakespeare appears with some others and starts listening, gives a sign to the others to stay quiet.*) He saw to it that Kit Marlowe and Tom Kyd destroyed each other, so that he could dominate the stage alone.

Shakespeare (to his closest man) Who is that man?

3 Ben Jonson, who wrote that dreadful play.

2 You are just a damned trouble-maker, you clown, who only comes here to talk a lot of bullshit!

1 If Will Shakespeare doesn't write his plays himself, it's probably Kit Marlowe hiding behind him.

2 Kit Marlowe is dead, you miserable humbug!

Jonson Or the theatre earl Stanley. Or his bugger friend the earl of Southampton. Or anyone. Maybe Essex, Raleigh or even Edmund Spenser. Everyone can write excellent stuff except him.

3 Don't come here talking shit about England's greatest playwright!

Jonson Evidently you are another one of his arse-lickers.

3 (*throws a play in his face*) Here is your bloody miserable play! It's the worst play ever written! Kit Marlowe, Tom Kyd, Greene and Sackville, Shakespeare and Heywood, they are all better than you!

Jonson If I differ so sharply from such a bunch of bumpkins I must be the best of all.

Shakespeare Enrol him.

3 What?

Shakespeare He acts well.

Jonson I am a playwright, no actor, you nitwit.

Shakespeare If you want your plays performed, you have to accept acting in them yourself.

Jonson Does that mean that you accept my play?

Shakespeare Of course.

3 (*shocked*) That silly trash?

Shakespeare I write worse myself.

Jonson So you are – Will Shakespeare?

Shakespeare And you, I understand, are Ben Jonson.

Jonson (*They shake hands.*) At least we could probably collaborate on stage.

Shakespeare This country needs new playwrights. Welcome.

1 (*continuing the discussion with 2*) I tell you, that Kit Marlowe lives! (*During the following, Shakespeare leaves.*)

2 And I tell you he is dead! That blasphemer and atheist got what he deserved! He dug his own grave! He said that the Jews did right in crucifying the Saviour, and for that Kit Marlowe got silenced enough in his own crucifixion! May the devil take him, as he took his doctor Faustus!

1 You are such a good actor that you believe yourself in the play you are acting!

2 And you are such a bad actor that you'd never understand that the truth doesn't matter!

1 What do you mean?

2 I have been in it longer than you. Even if Kit Marlowe lives and writes Shakespeare's plays, it doesn't matter, for all that matters in his theatre are the plays! Stick to the play, and don't bother about the truth!

1 Who taught you that?

2 Kit Marlowe! (*leaves in a fury*)

1 There is actually something to it. It's the play that must live and not the playwright, as he writes his plays like an act of self-effacement to endow his plays with life at the cost of his own. Kit Marlowe would perhaps prefer being dead in order to live, although he lives. That's how it must be. Now I understand what the theatre is!

3 How could Shakespeare accept such a bad play as this rot by Jonson? Does he desire the contrary to his own?

Jonson Don't you get it?

3 No.

Jonson He is painfully aware that his own plays are the worst of all. Therefore he tolerates mine, which are the second worst. I come closest.

3 You have only come here to talk rubbish! Get down to work instead! Learn this part by heart! At once! (*gives him a manuscript*)

Jonson (throws a glance in it) You must be damned to be an actor! Once you are, it's farewell forever to all your credibility. Then all that matters is the masks and the characters. (*leaves studying his manuscript*)

3 (*to 1*) And you, don't just stand there with your mouth open! Do you want to play the fool?

1 I was always a fool up till now, but suddenly I have realized the meaning of life.

3 And what's that?

1 To be true to all the lies that you perform to your audience.

3 Are you a philosopher?

1 The divinest philosopher is a playwright who only lives to deceive his audience. No one is wiser than he.

3 Who is that?

1 Kit Marlowe.

3 He is dead.

1 Then it's Will Shakespeare who doesn't exist. (*leaves*)

3 Perhaps after all that we could be in need of a miserable failure like Ben Jonson just to balance all that first class incomprehensible nonsense that already is too immortal on stage for us ever to be rid of it. It would have been different if Kit Marlowe had been allowed to continue acting!

Scen 3. The court of Henry IV in France.

Royal banquet in great festivity. Food and drink is served around.

General song: "*Vive Henri Quatre, vive ce roi vaillant!*"

Henry IV (after the song is over) Well, how do you like it in my country, my friend?

Marlowe I never felt better, your majesty.

Henry Call me Henry. We are after all colleagues. (*twinkles, and raises his cup*)

Marlowe Honestly, Sir, I never quite understood your overwhelming good will for me. I find it difficult to believe it's true.

Henry I know you, my friend. Not many are those who know you, but those who do have the world's greatest sympathy for you. And it's not just because you are the most important diplomatic link between France, England and Holland. We trust you, my darling.

Marlowe But your wife, my king? How can you deceive her with me?

Henry Woman, my friend, is the saddest of all human chapters. Ask me, who had my life and destiny run by Catherine of Medici. I know the women. On my wedding night all the decent people of Paris were murdered just because I was

obliged to marry the daughter of Catherine of Medici. Whatever you do, Kit, don't call her a queen. She is just a woman. Her mother could run my life and everyone's life according to her will, but after the old terrible hag is gone with all her intrigues, I will do with her daughter as I please. I never hesitated in deceiving her and least of all with handsome young men.

Marlowe But, my king, aren't women still human, and shouldn't they be treated humanly? Man's love of woman is natural, but love between the same sex is unnatural.

Henry Are you pulling my leg, my friend? Or are you just teasing me? You must surely know as an unprejudiced and wise man that all love is natural. All men are by nature bisexual. So let them! Let nature have its course! Of course it is a fact that only women can be mothers. You can only get sons by sexual intercourse with women. That's undisputable. And for the sake of the family and his children, a man should be faithful to his wife, and he acts wrongly if he isn't. But it is an entirely different story if you are the king of France. All courts have always been totally corrupted. I will not brag about it, just acknowledge facts. But please allow me a question of some intimacy, my dear friend.

Marlowe Please go ahead.

Henry Have you actually never had a woman?

Marlowe I never drilled a hole in a woman, if that's what you mean.

Henry That's exactly what I mean. Did you drill a man in that way?

Marlowe I don't drill holes, your majesty. I am too sensitive for that. I was early seduced by older men and learned love that way. I love. That is all.

Henry And that gave you your strange destiny. You loved yourself away. You are a dead man without a human existence. How does it actually feel to be nothing and still the greatest craftsman of words of your country?

Marlowe Honestly, my king and friend, I gave a sigh of relief when I was dead. I didn't have to pose and act any more and could start observing life from its true perspective – from the gutter. I was no longer stuck in any position. I was free at last to start writing for real.

Henry But you can never retrieve your position. You can never form a family or live safely at home in your own country.

Marlowe But my art will remain established. I still have friends in England who will protect me with their lives. And if I wish I can go home and operate under other names. But I prefer to live completely for my art as the best channel of my love.

Henry So your plays are like your children?

Marlowe Yes, my spiritual children, and as such I endow them with immortal life.

Henry What play are you working on now?

Marlowe Henry IV.

Henry About me?

Marlowe No, an English king 200 years ago. But the play reflects much of my free life without responsibility in good company.

Henry Would you include me in any of your plays?

Marlowe You already are, your majesty, in two of them.

Henry Let me guess – a tragedy and a comedy.

Marlowe Quite correct, your majesty. Your life almost turned into a tragedy by the massacre at Paris after your wedding but still turned a comedy by your sensible detachment from religion.

Henry If Paris had been worth a black mass I would have celebrated that as well. Religion is fool's play which only admits morons void of all self-criticism and common sense. Politics is something else.

Marlowe What is politics, your majesty?

Henry Just stick to calling me Henry. We are colleagues, aren't we? (*twinkles and raises his cup*) Politics, my friend, is to make sure that every Frenchman has his own chicken for dinner every Sunday. If you succeed with that, you are a good politician and may retain your power. Cheers, my friend, for good hunting!

Marlowe To follow you on your chase, my friend Henry, has become my life's greatest pleasure.

Henry That's the spirit! More wine! More geese on the plates! We have a party here!

(*The general song is resumed, and the banquet goes on in the best of moods.*)

Henry Damn, Kit, I envy you. We shall share the night together, and we shall make love like pigs, but you are still young, your whole life is still ahead of you, and you must allow yourself some true love with a woman, the real, natural, carnal love, so that you become a human being of flesh and meat and not just remain an eternally dying soul out of touch with reality. Go to Italy. I will send you as my ambassador to Mantua and Florence, Verona and Venice, and shall pay all your costs. Love women, Kit, love life, and think of me who gave it to you. Write poems of me. Write love poems to your king, the man who loved you more than any man can love a woman.

Marlowe I don't know Italian, my king.

Henry It is easy to learn. You know Latin, you dunce, and Greek as well. In Italy you will be like a fish in water. That's where you should have lived from the start. You are a renaissance poet and could become the greatest of all. Go to Italy, my friend, at my cost, and love the women of Venice, at my cost, and think of me, your king, who never could allow himself a human life, because he was stuck in his role as a king; except with you, my friend, who came and saved me from all my power and inhumanity by your total honesty in the lack of roles. (*pause*)

Marlowe My king, I have loved many, but none have loved me as you.

Henry And you say that without my having touched you.

Marlowe Yes. Your love is greater than any flesh can express.

Henry Then I will touch you even less. You are sacred by your total humanity. Be my friend, young poet, but never forget me.

Marlowe Your love, Henry, will never die.

Henry Thanks for those words, my friend. You almost make me feel like a human being.

Scene 4. Scadbury Park (like act I scene 2 and act II scene 2.)

(Sir Thomas by the open fireplace.)

Walsingham The years pass and only grow longer while the increasing slowness of age makes life only vanish the quicker out of your hourglass. At the same time positions are more hopelessly locked, crises more difficult to solve and the burdens of your life's mistakes more heavy on your heart and more difficult to bear. And then the ailments enter your body with the increasing lust to just forget and bury everything in the cup of drunkenness, which only dims your brains and hastens your senility. But it's perhaps best that way, so that you the sooner may die and forget everything. What is it Toby? *(enter Toby)*

Toby A guest, Sir.

Walsingham The one I expected?

Toby The same.

Walsingham Show him in. *(Toby leaves.)* And as the only happy one, he in his loneliness appears, who survived his own death and lives on like a ghost without position and identity and with no honour, but the freer in constantly increasing creativity, which just goes on impressing more and more in confounding greatness of output.

(Enter Lord Stanley.)

Lord William Stanley! Thanks for visiting me! You are one of those few who always return and are the more welcome each time.

Stanley I just wished to hear the latest news as usual.

Walsingham Nothing new. He writes poems, produces plays, lives freely and keeps on constantly surpassing himself.

Stanley What is the latest?

Walsingham *(producing a bunch of papers)* A fresh intrepid war drama of the fifth Henry of Lancaster.

Stanley He never took part in any battle but still describes war as if he lived in it as a general.

Walsingham And he is always victorious, even if there is a long way through defeats and tragedies to a still infallible glorious end. There is no greater fighting spirit in all England than in the dramas of this dead exile.

Stanley Have you already written it out?

Walsingham It's copied and finished. The distribution will now be on your responsibility as usual. And our man on stage, William Shakespeare, does his job thoroughly, I understand?

Stanley He undertakes his task with great seriousness. We could never have found a more reliable man. He studies the dramas meticulously, shows a deep understanding for their texts, has a good hand with the players and produce them with splendid results, as if he had written them himself.

Walsingham It's just a pity that Kit cannot see them.

Stanley Who is Kit? I thought he was dead. Maybe you mean someone else?

Walsingham Pardon me. I forgot myself. *(enter Toby, greatly agitated)*

What is it, Toby?

Toby Sir, another most unexpected visit!

Walsingham Who is it?

Elizabeth (outside) Don't loiter, boy, but show me in! I haven't come here from London to be antichambered!

Walsingham and Stanley The Queen!

Elizabeth (breaking in) So you are two? So much the better! Tom, I am to knight you, so it is just as well that I may see how you live. (*looking around*) It will do. There is room enough here for my retinue. I can stay here for a few days. That will be a nice and suitable rest and relaxation from my working life. (*takes a seat in the greatest armchair*) How are you, gentlemen?

Stanley Thank you, life goes on.

Walsingham We manage.

Elizabeth And how is your strange ward, Tom, whom you had killed and then sent on to the continent?

Walsingham He writes beautiful letters and poems, plays and compositions. Our hastily and unnecessarily executed poet has never felt or written any better.

Elizabeth Where is he today?

Walsingham If he isn't with the intrepid Henry of Navarre, he should be knocking around in Italy.

Elizabeth What is he up to in Italy? His place is on the continent. After all, he is our most important agent in France, the Netherlands and Vienna.

Walsingham King Henry sent him on a mission to Italy.

Elizabeth (angry) He is in our service and not in king Henry's!

Walsingham Your majesty, he is a free man after his murder, since he no longer exists.

Elizabeth God damn and God's blood! Get him home to England at once! Henry could change sides any time, as he has done before, and again become a Catholic in league with that old scoundrel Philip! Don't you know that we are at perpetual war with Spain? Ireland is in rebellion again, and Philip intends to send another armada against us!

Stanley My Queen, I heard from reliable sources that our arch enemy king Philip now is dead. To the relief of all Spain, there will be no fifth armada sent against England to its own certain destruction.

Elizabeth Philip dead? Can such tough scoundrels die?

Stanley He appears to have died of joy when he heard about the new rebellion in Ulster.

Elizabeth Then the Ulster men's rebellion brought a piece of good news, even if it was the only one. And I must send Essex there to clear up the mess. Him I cannot trust. Lord Stanley, you will go with him, although I do not trust you either. It will be your task there to guard him. But what was the subject we were discussing? Oh yes, our dead heretic poet! He must come home to England!

Walsingham My Queen, there is one thing I can assure you, and that is that our poet will not change sides. There is no greater patriot and no more loyal Englishman than

the poet we murdered, buried without a grave and exiled without honour. His own plays prove it.

Elizabeth The ones that are making master Shakespeare rich?

Walsingham Not without deserving it. He produces them, enacts them and entertains all England with them as if he had written them himself.

Elizabeth A great opportunism, brilliant double standards, a perfect arrangement, and what a double play! What does our poet think about it?

Walsingham He is quite satisfied if he is allowed to work in peace.

Elizabeth So it seems to work out all by itself. You, Stanley, will accompany Essex to Ireland. Remember, that you watch him for me! If he turns against me you are both dead!

Stanley My Queen, I am as faithful as your poet.

Elizabeth I will knight you in a few days, Tom. I just wanted to look around and make sure that you deserve your knighthood. You deserve it for the poet's sake. I wish I could knight him along with you.

Walsingham I will write that to him, your majesty.

Elizabeth You will do nothing of the sort. He is dead, so it will not do. He must wait until some day he will have some sort of an exoneration, and it will hardly occur in my lifetime. Look to it that you behave and act your parts, gentlemen. I haven't been here tonight. (*departs*)

Walsingham You never know where you have that woman.

Stanley The same accounts for every woman, Tom.

Walsingham Are you not happily married?

Stanley My wife is more with Essex than with me. She rather stays here in London than with me in Lancashire.

Walsingham What do you think of the Irish rebellion?

Stanley The Irish just are like that. It's a hell every time it happens and you have to go there to massacre them. Most tired out of that sordid business of all is our good friend Essex.

Walsingham Is she sending him there to be rid of him?

Stanley That is to be feared, Tom. Of all punishments, that's the worst, the most inhuman and thankless. If he doesn't fall in battle there, it will make him an irreconcilable enemy to her.

Walsingham So she will get what she wants whatever happens?

Stanley It looks bad for Essex, Tom. He is practically executed already. Thanks for the play. Fortunately the theatre will always survive.

Walsingham Good night, Sir William. (*Stanley takes his hat on and leaves.*)

She might have five years left to live at most. What will come after her? Nobody knows. But no matter how she governs, no one can follow her. Our good days are hopelessly drawing to a close, and every man knows, that after each day of sunshine, there will be a night of darkness.

(*resumes his place, brooding by the fire.*)

Act IV scene 1. An army camp in Ulster.

Essex It's hopeless, Derby. We can't defeat Tyrone.

Stanley It's unlike you to give up, Robert.

Essex We have no choice. I am no general. I can't handle a war. I am a courtier and cavalier, like the earl of Leicester. I should be sitting down by the skirts of the Queen and not be cast out into a warfare masquerade to the wild Ireland, where I can only make a fool of myself.

Stanley You begged for this mission yourself.

Essex I know.

Stanley The Queen expects you to go through with it. She will never forgive you if you fail.

Essex She coolly calculated on that I would augment her cult by my Irish victories. She thought that I better than anyone else could increase her prestige and pour some oil on the senseless psychosis of nationalism. It turned out to be water instead, and her proud army in Ireland has been lost in the rains dwindling to a fourth. We have nothing else to do than to admit our defeat.

Stanley What will you do?

Essex Make peace.

Stanley For that you could be beheaded in London.

Essex Do I have any choice?

Stanley Go on with the war.

Essex And sacrifice the last fourth? Consummate my defeat? Come home to London naked? To cut the losses now and go home is my only chance.

Stanley You risk your life.

Essex Here there is nothing else to do for all of us than to lose our lives.

Stanley Our poet's nationalistic drama production will get upset and fall out of fashion. He will not be happy.

Essex You mean that William Shakespeare, alias Kit Marlowe.

Stanley You know about it?

Essex I am related to Sir Thomas. We still have that state secret left even if we lose everything else. But where is the poet now? How did he manage to remain concealed all these years without raising any suspicions?

Stanley He has a safe refuge with Henry of Navarre in France and another with me in Lancashire. I do have several castles.

Essex And then he can hide with Sir Thomas but never for long. Sometimes he has been seen haunting London but only to always disappear at once.

Stanley He is very careful and very restless. Wherever he stays it's never for long. It's only with me and king Henry that he feels quite safe. But his best protection is William Shakespeare.

Essex But they haven't even met.

Stanley No, but that theatre man is very careful about handling the business well. He makes much on it, since the plays are given in his name, and he doesn't want to lose that productive milk cow. His name has become synonymous with a good play of quality which must fill the house. He lives on not falling out of his role, and his stagings are always perfect.

Essex Is that why the Queen favours him?

Stanley Yes, she also doesn't want to lose her role.

Essex What does the poet himself say about it?

Stanley Nothing. He just goes on working, obsessed by his art and by humanity.

Essex How long do you think it can go on?

Stanley Until he is abandoned by his muse. (*enter Southampton*)

Southampton Gentlemen, aren't we ready for attack?

Essex There will be no more attack.

Southampton What?

Essex Sit down and take it easy. We have more important things to discuss than vain and futile wars.

Southampton Like what? What could be more important than winning the Queen's war?

Essex Your poet, who writes love poems to you.

Southampton (*brightening up*) William Shakespeare?

Stanley (*aside to Essex*) Doesn't he know?

Essex (*back*) He knows absolutely nothing. – Yes, the very same.

Southampton It's an honour for me to be his sponsor. His love poetry is the most beautiful in the world.

Stanley And he writes all his love poems only to you?

Southampton I take that for granted. They are all dedicated to me ever since his first great poem "Venus and Adonis".

Essex Yes, there will be reasons enough to discuss William Shakespeare's love poems to Henry Wriothesley of Southampton for several hundred years.

(Stanley laughs aside.)

Southampton What is the joke?

Stanley (*cheerful*) Nothing, my friend, just your debatable future legendariness.

Southampton (*doesn't understand, doesn't care*) But isn't it risky to interrupt the war? What will the Queen say?

Essex She may say what she pleases. I don't care. I don't want to kill and sacrifice more people, and I am tired of being her puppet and jumping-jack. I am a free human being and no slave and least of all an old capricious vain and tyrannical old maid's lackey.

Southampton If your views reaches the Queen's ear, your head will be likely to come off.

Essex Let her hear it! Let all women hear what cruel tyrants they are, who aren't even aware of the irresponsibility with which they handle men's feelings and

make themselves guilty of unfathomable tragedies to them! She will be certain to cut off my head, since she is a woman, and I loved her!

Stanley Take it easy, Robert. You still have your wife to live for.

Essex Yes, I have, just as you have your wife to live for.

Stanley That was unnecessary.

Essex So? I happened to hit the bull's eye? I didn't even think of aiming.

Southampton Gentlemen, don't start arguing about your women.

Stanley We might as well have it sorted out immediately. You know very well, Robert, that my wife rather stays with you than with me.

Essex I can only admit that she is keen on me. Judge her, not me.

Stanley Have you slept with her?

Essex Ask her. She knows best that I rather slept than was awake.

Stanley So it's true.

Essex I can't judge her. You may judge her, for she is your wife. But take into your account, that she was bored up in the cold winter fortresses of Lancashire and always wanted festivity and warm society around her, which she only found in London. (*laying his hand on him*) She is only a woman, William. Don't judge her for being a woman. Then you must judge the whole female sex.

Stanley Kit Marlowe did that, who created our theatre for only male actors to play both women and men, so that no women could drag the female ideal in the mud, and by the years I am more and more tempted to give him right.

Southampton There are also good women.

Stanley Yes, they always mean well but cause irreparable damage nonetheless.

Essex All can not be buggers like Kit Marlowe. The world must also have children. And we men must have sons.

Stanley You are right, Essex. We can't judge woman. This trial is not correct since there is no woman present to defend her hopeless cause. So we close the case.

Essex The judge has spoken. May we instead be judged by Queen Elizabeth.

Stanley I am afraid that woman could be worse as a prosecutor than as an advocate.

Essex Especially if she has power.

Stanley I resign. Mind your business, gentlemen. (*leaves them*)

Southampton We are in the same boat, Robert. I had fallen out of grace even before I followed you to Ireland.

Essex Still I don't think she will touch a hair on your head. She needs you more than me.

Southampton For what?

Essex You protect Shakespeare.

Southampton And why am I needed for that?

Essex Because you don't know who you are protecting. (*leaves him*)

Southampton Now he also speaks in riddles. The devil take these cryptic literates! If Essex now will turn as mysterious as Shakespeare in his incomprehensible love poems to me, I think I will have just had it!

Scene 2. The Queen's bedchamber.

She is completely unmasked with long grey hairs, old and awful.

Elizabeth (facing her mirror) Behold the power of England, that defeated Spain with her four invincible world armadas and fundamentally ruined the catholic papal empire with its world monopoly! What is then this brave England, which thus can act a police and bringer of freedom to the world? – Nothing but this shallow shell of a bitter crone, frustrated of all things human and with nothing left except this rotten superficial artifice of power. If England could see the soul of England in this fallen derelict shed, this dusty outlived ruin of what once could have become a woman, this mummy that survived herself for generations, England would implode for shame to never more be able to show herself even politically to this world. All my power and glory and sovereignty are but theatrical effects in a superficial masquerade in the theatre of vanity, which only gets more exhausted in its emptiness the longer it is hanged out as a scarecrow on stage to there catch an easily beguiled audience in fascination of her lies, borrowed feathers and deceits piled up like towering stones of cliffs on each other in a pyramid just to conceal a black hole of a grave that never gets filled up enough with only vanity and emptiness.

(Essex suddenly opens the door and breaks in.)

Elizabeth (frightened) Essex!

Essex (throws himself on his knees in utter humility) My Queen, I had to see you at once to explain everything.

Elizabeth What has happened? Why aren't you in Ireland?

Essex I have made peace with Tyrone.

Elizabeth (finds herself immediately) So he is still alive? You were to vanquish him once and for all and triumph with his severed head on the Tower!

Essex My Queen, three fourths of my army was lost. They just went down in fevers, desertion, cowardly escape, they fell on the battlefields, disappeared in the forests, went over to the enemy, ran home to their farms – I can't say more. I couldn't crush Tyrone, and to save your last four thousand men I made peace.

Elizabeth (pretends benevolence) My friend, you are brave coming here with such a confession, accepting your own responsibility for such a backlash to my entire government. Your honesty is impressing in its straightforward fearlessness.

Essex (still on his knees) No one else is guilty. I carry the whole burden of accountability. I have failed. Forgive me.

Elizabeth All my men have failed in Ireland. You are but one of many, but the last one.

Essex Don't judge Southampton. Judge none of the others. Judge only me.

Elizabeth I am looking through you, my friend. *(takes his chin)* You forget that I know you. With your eloquence and nobility as means and arguments you ask me to overlook your failure. That is not for me to do. Your destiny is decided by the council, not by me. I am still less a military than you. But I appreciate your honesty,

and I forgive you your worst crime: (*harder*) to dare to impose on my privacy on your own initiative and surprise me in my own bedchamber!

Essex Please forgive me, your majesty.

Elizabeth (softer) I forgive you. But go straight home and change. Your clothes are muddy. Neither am I very representative. Come to dinner, and we will talk better. This is quite unworthy of both of us.

Essex My Queen...

Elizabeth (angry) Get lost! (*Essex pulls out, backwards.*)
(*embittered*) What a scoundrel! (*blackout*)

Scene 3.

Stanley False, miserable woman! Are you happy now with your love? You haven't just completely put yourself to shame and lost all your credibility, but also deceived me with the greatest traitor of the country!

Elizabeth de Vere (desperate) My husband, I haven't committed adultery.

Stanley No, and Essex has in no way made any rebellion! He only conspired by mistake! By accident he happened to raise the banner of rebellion!

Elizabeth Don't condemn me. He was the favourite of the Queen and of the whole country. He flirted with me and invited me to friendly intimacy. We didn't go to bed.

Stanley You are infected with that man's lies! He proclaimed his rebellion in the noble intention not to harm the Queen! He only wanted to overthrow the state but keep the Queen! His lies are like yours: you didn't sleep with each other. You only loved each other.

Elizabeth (throwing herself on the floor) Then kill me rather than bereave me so cruelly of my soul and womanhood!

Stanley You didn't know what you were doing. Women never know what they are doing. They just do it and repress it and forget it, deny it and regret it for the rest of their tortured lives. You didn't know what you were doing when you preferred the vain superficial charlatan to honour and your country and your life with your husband.

Elizabeth My husband, you were like a desert, sinister, cold and gloomy. I needed some change, I couldn't live without water, I desperately needed an oasis. Our friend the proud Essex showed me understanding, like as if he could think like a woman himself.

Stanley He acted just like a woman. He was more womanly in his distraction and impulsiveness than the Queen, who in all her frigidity still is a woman who understands how to guard her honour. (*enter a servant*)

What is it?

Servant Sir Walter Raleigh, my lord.

Stanley Away with you, woman! Your narrow luck is that I have been faithful to you. I pardon you. Now get out!

Elizabeth I only wanted to have some fun for a change. (*leaves*)

Stanley Alas, that's what they all want, but they all find it more difficult than anything else, and it always ends up badly: tears, blood and tragedy is all that my wife and Essex harvested on their quest for having fun. (*enter Raleigh*)

What's up, Sir Walter?

Raleigh In brief, everything is going to hell.

Stanley Is there any hope for Essex?

Raleigh He dug his own grave in sheer thoughtlessness.

Stanley What will be his verdict?

Raleigh The Queen can forgive him everything, but when she blocked him from his business monopoly on sweet wines his true ego burst forth. He could not forgive her that, and then he let the whole world know that she was an abominable living carcass.

Stanley Essex carelessness galore.

Raleigh A woman can forgive anything except being hurt in her vanity by an unpleasant truth. That's why Essex will be decapitated in February.

Stanley Thereby she executes the finest remains of her proud and free England. He was the final glorious flower of all her fruitful gardening.

Raleigh That's the way all England feels. But there will still be another age after her. Our country will not perish with her.

Stanley What are you insinuating?

Raleigh We must have a King after the Queen.

Stanley Of course. King James of Scotland, Mary Stuart's son.

Raleigh No one wants him in England. He is a conceited fool.

Stanley No one else is possible.

Raleigh There is only one candidate.

Stanley Oh no. Don't try that one on me, Sir Walter.

Raleigh You are the only one, William. You have everything which that Scottish fop is lacking.

Stanley He has everything which I lack: legitimacy.

Raleigh What is that legitimacy? A royal family of petty egoists, vain maniacs, metaphysical drunkards and incompetent fools? Half of all the Stuarts have been decapitated or murdered in other ways and never without a reason.

Stanley That merit is shared by most royal families.

Raleigh William, accept your responsibility! Your family is spotfree. You have no maniacs in the family. You are all intelligent, cultural and diplomatic characters of integrity. Your balance and world knowledge is needed as a counterweight to the passions and exaggerations of the last century!

Stanley I have a more important obligation.

Raleigh Impossible! What do you have to live for besides politics except the theatre?

Stanley The theatre is more important than all the world.

Raleigh Are you then a fool?

Stanley No, I am all that for which you accuse me: a balanced, world wise diplomat.

Raleigh Then you fail your country!

Stanley No, Sir Walter, I only fail you. I know that you have nothing good to expect of king James. But put yourself in my situation. Perhaps you intentionally forget, that my family is gravely involved with the Catholics. I was always the candidate of the Catholics to the throne, and if I were to accept that candidature as pretender to the throne, not only the Protestants and puritans would react sourly with violence. I would also have James and Scotland against me. While if James now would be king, Scotland and England would be united in peace. That would constitute a firm ground for a great age of the kingdom of the united British Isles. That's what Elizabeth and England needs and wants. You must weigh the political advantages against the disadvantages of the alternative. I will vanish in that scale, Sir Walter.

Raleigh King James would wish to see me dead.

Stanley I will do anything to help you. My voluntary abstention from the candidature would perhaps help you most of all.

Raleigh You commit political suicide for England's political future. What will you get out of that? You must realize yourself that you are so much better than that conceited faker.

Stanley I have my theatre.

Raleigh I know. Many believe you wrote all those excellent chronicles that appear in the name of William Shakespeare, for they all carefully follow your own family.

Stanley I trust you belong to those who know about the secret of the murder of Christopher Marlowe?

Raleigh You don't mean to say that he is still keeping busy writing plays?

Stanley Who else?

Raleigh Who else but you? All Catholics know and tear their hairs for that you don't care about the crown and only wants to pen comedies.

Stanley Marlowe lives under my and Walsingham's protection and also under king Henry's of France if necessary. Sometimes I considered sending him to Man. There would be no place safer for him.

Raleigh Where is he now?

Stanley Only he knows.

Raleigh I always wondered about his departure. Still today many maintain that he was the greatest poetical genius of all and that not even Shakespeare surpasses him. But you go well together, the two of you. You are both masters of self-effacement for the sake of England.

Stanley Don't be surprised if he suddenly turns up.

Raleigh Can't you make him do just that? I would like to meet him, if he is actually still alive. *(A secret door opens in the tapestry, and Marlowe comes forth.)*

Marlowe Pardon my eavesdropping.

Raleigh Kit Marlowe! You are really alive! *(goes up to him, touches him, embraces him)* My son! My disciple! All your fate is entirely my fault! It was I who first seduced you by my heresies!

Marlowe Sir Walter, no one must know that I am alive.

Raleigh Is that your condition for staying alive?

Marlowe My sincere and sinister condition.

Raleigh An inhuman condition. How long can you allow an amateur from Stratford to harvest all the glory that only is yours?

Marlowe He does a good job. He produces my plays and makes them successful. I could never have done that myself.

Raleigh And he makes outrageous fortunes on them.

Marlowe Some of that reaches me. Some goes to Walsingham's clerks, who write them out. And some goes to Lord Stanley here, who copies them. But the most important thing is that the poetry reaches all England.

Raleigh How can you accept such an existence? Without family, without name, without future?

Marlowe Look at Essex and Southampton, Shakespeare's sponsors. They had a name, family and future. Southampton betrayed Essex, so that Essex will end on the scaffold. For that the dashing Southampton got a life sentence in prison. There's England's glory and destiny for you, Sir Walter. And if you survive them yourself with your doubtful merits, it would perhaps be a miracle. Perhaps I am the happiest among you who is already dead.

Raleigh My Kit, my darling boy! (*embraces him*) Shall we meet again?

Marlowe At least on the other side of the grave if not before.

Raleigh I can only say, what they all say in your tragedy, that if we meet again we will smile indeed.

Marlowe That's what Brutus and Cassius say with sadness, since they know they will never meet again.

Raleigh This is too much. I came to you, Lord Stanley, full of hopes but part from you with a broken heart. I have seen too much, having seen the truth.

Stanley Farewell, my brother. The theatre is always there.

Raleigh But for how long? Everything is falling apart in this world of betrayed ideals. And when our glorious Queen is no more, we shall have a vain imbecile and flimsy clown for a fake king who isn't even funny. The tragedy is masked in a most pathetic political black comedy which only can end up in disaster. I don't believe in your new England, Stanley. Only you could have saved it. (*leaves*)

Marlowe I apologise that I couldn't keep myself from appearing.

Stanley Absolutely no harm is done. Sir Walter Raleigh belongs to us reliable enough to rather vanish in a grave without honour than divulge anything of our secret. We still have our theatre, my friend, no matter how much England may go to hell.

Act V scene 1.

The King's own private theatre. The entire court enters with King James leading with his Queen. Among the others are Sir Thomas Walsingham and in the end Lord Stanley. They all find their seats (with their faces to the audience) expecting a theatre performance.

James What is it now, Lord Stanley, that you have come up with? How dare you present surprises?

Stanley Your majesty, it is an old play which always has been performed with success, but it has now found a new form and been greatly expanded.

Queen No indecencies, I hope?

Stanley Of course not, my Queen.

Walsingham I know the play. It was performed with success already twenty years ago, and didn't you yourself act in it in Denmark?

Stanley It was to the Danish court in Elsinore, which castle Kronborg then was inaugurated. But much water has flowed both in the English Channel and the Danish since then.

James Was that the king who was so flamboyant that he fired cannons to every common toast taken at his party?

Stanley The very king.

James That was no king for gloomy puritans, who think they will be admitted to heaven just for banning all humour.

Queen Is the play amusing?

Stanley It's an exciting and in parts amusing tragedy.

Walsingham Let's just have enough corpses filling all the stage with blood in the finale, and it will be like in Kit's good old days.

Queen Who is Kit?

James A deceased scandal writer.

Walsingham It was he and Tom Kyd who created the English drama. Our all dominating theatre man Shakespeare is just like a village craftsman in comparison.

James Don't talk ill of our good man Shakespeare. He has given us many good laughs by his cheerful comedies. He will be here tonight, won't he?

Stanley He is the producer of the play who staged it.

James Call him out. I want to see him.

Stanley (giving a sign to the backstage. Calls are heard: Will Shakespeare! He appears from one side.)

James My good entertainer, they tell me you are responsible for the performance tonight.

Shakespeare May it please your majesty.

James It pleased earl Derby here to make it a surprise. I hope there will be no unpleasant surprises to my Queen?

Shakespeare There is a ghost in the beginning. But like in all real tragedies there are lots of tears and blood, but may it please your majesty that all villains will die in the end.

James In other words: a happy ending! I like that!

Walsingham (aside) Let's see how you like it that the king is a villain!

James So let the show begin! We are eagerly expecting it!

Shakespeare It will be my pleasure, your majesty. (*bows and leaves*)

Stanley (aside to Shakespeare) No truncations of the text?

Shakespeare It's like an entirely new play now performed for the first time. (*exit*)

Walsingham What have you really come up with, Stanley? No unpleasant reminders of Sir Walter Raleigh?

Stanley He is with us tonight like in the good old days.

Walsingham He and Southampton are imprisoned for life. What does master Shakespeare think of that?

Stanley He never touched on the subject with one word.

Walsingham Not even in this new play?

Stanley Least of all.

Walsingham Then we'll manage.

James (impatient) Get on with the show now! What are we waiting for?

(*The staff is thumped in the floor. The lights are cut, except for a cold light on stage.*)

Queen (shuddering) Evidently it's cold in Denmark.

Stanley It will pass.

Cecil Horatio? Wasn't there a Horatio in Thomas Kyd's play?

Walsingham All ghosts of the past come back in this play.

Queen Whew!

James There is the ghost! But that is master Shakespeare himself!

Cecil Quiet! Don't ruin our play!

Walsingham A sad old countenance, one of the constantly more common unblest spirits of our realm, that unjustly were forced out into limbo and therefore never will find peace.

Stanley I share your melancholy, Sir Thomas.

James I think I recognize this.

Queen Have you seen the play before?

James It's possible. But it is very daring to start a play with an unblest ghost.

Cecil Don't ruin the whole play for us by sitting gossiping! Another wants to hear what the actors are saying!

Queen They have their written parts. What we say is more relevant.

Cecil But not during the performance!

James (to the Queen) My dear, Sir Robert Cecil is right.

Walsingham So there is the protagonist. Another sad melancholy character from yesterday. It could have been Kit.

Queen He seems depressed. Could he suffer from tooth-ache? Perhaps he has an indigestion.

James He is probably only suffering from spleen, like everybody else.

Cecil Can't you keep quiet?

Queen Surely we have a right to talk?

Cecil But not in the middle of the drama!

Walsingham Your theatre production is like pearls to swine, Stanley.

Stanley It has always been like that. That's why Kit left it all – and concentrated on writing even better plays instead.

Shakespeare (*looking furtively out of the curtain, to Stanley*) Is the performance all right?

Stanley Splendid, Will, just splendid!

James I want to see the ghost again!

Shakespeare It will come! (*disappears*)

Cecil I don't like that old chancellor. Is that to be some caricature of my father?

Stanley How on earth could you get such an idea, Sir Robert?
(*The light darkens and gets blue again.*)

Queen Oh oh! Now it's getting cold again!

Walsingham Night of fate, night of horror, night of destiny.

James What do you mean, Sir Thomas?

Walsingham I just wanted to join in the mood.

Queen Whew! I dare not look!

James So that was it. The ghost was murdered by his brother, who usurped the power. But the brother is an anointed king, and this king is a villain. Is this very appropriate and constructive to morals of society. Lord Stanley?

Stanley It happened in Denmark long ago.

James So it's only in Denmark that something is rotten in the state and only long ago. Is that correct, Lord Stanley?

Stanley Exactly so.

James Yes, it is best seen symbolically. Or else, who knows who might become inspired to what?

Cecil That old clown again! He reminds too strongly of my father. Can't you strike him out of the play?

Stanley Too late, Sir Robert. But he will be disposed of.

James A bold play, on my honour, which sets the entire court in a state of embarrassment: a criminal king and a mad crown prince. Could it get worse?

Queen Can't you make it quicker so that we can see how it ends? Like all actors they talk too much.

Cecil It's always like that in all of Shakespeare's scenes.

James It has been said that he doesn't write them himself. Who else could it be? Could it be you, Lord Stanley, who gave up your candidature for the throne for the theatre?

Stanley I am innocent, your majesty.

James Yes, you are almost the only one in the country who managed to keep your family innocent by keeping out of every intrigue. But you could have taken the crown after Elizabeth, Stanley. Why didn't you?

Stanley I didn't want it.

James I thank you for it.

Stanley Nothing to be thankful for.

Queen But that he is allowed to go at the poor innocent Ophelia like that! Can no one teach him manners?

James But he is mad, my love. Madmen are allowed anything on stage.

Queen But little Ophelia could be harmed by such an offensive and clumsy manly brutality!

Walsingham Mind you, it's only a play.

James But the intrigue has petered out. Will there be no action soon?

Stanley The action hasn't even started yet.

James (bored) Yes, I can see that. And of course we'll not see any more sign of the ghost?

Stanley Just wait.

James (invigoured) That sounds good!

Queen You and your ghosts! Is that all that could interest you?

Walsingham Unfortunately all interesting people are but ghosts nowadays.

James Just don't mention Essex!

Walsingham I haven't mentioned him.

Queen What about Essex?

James Elizabeth cut off his head. I am content with having them in the Tower for life.

Queen You are gracious, my king.

James But what is this? A play in the play?

Stanley Why not? Sometimes you need a theatre for a mirror to see your own reality. That's what's happening to this Danish court now.

Queen Will that not somewhat complicate the intrigue?

James You bet it will.

Walsingham He suddenly sounds like Elizabeth.

Stanley To please you, my Queen, there will now be a pantomime, so that none of the actors will say a word, so you may talk as much as you please.

James I think that murder of the king is getting a little too much of an argument.

Queen Weren't your own father murdered in a similar way, darling?

James My father was blown up in pieces.

Queen By his wife's lover, who assumed power after him?

James Please don't remind me of it.

Queen Earl Derby, you seem to have projected your king's own terrible past in a play on stage. For what purpose?

Stanley None at all. This king was murdered by leprosy poison by his own brother. That's much worse than any royal assassination that ever took place in Scotland.

James You are right. I like the play. There are different dimensions to it.

Walsingham It's a correct review of all the world's politics.

Cecil But how could Hamlet doubt the ghost? Why doesn't he at last take the life of that criminal usurper? To say the least, it is criminal to tarry!

Walsingham Because he is a Catholic. He didn't want to send the king to heaven but to hell. Pure superstition, so to say. Kit would have liked that satire. Superstition paralyses power and politics.

Queen No, this is going too far! Now the boy abuses his own mother!

Walsingham He is only bitter against the female sex.

James For some good reason, it seems. His own mother let him down, didn't she?

Queen But he just can't behave in such a manner! First his beloved Ophelia, and now his mother the Queen! This is outrageous! What kind of a play is this?

Stanley Try to look at it in its correct perspective of time, my Queen.

Queen What do you mean?

Stanley It happened many hundred years ago.

Queen But it's happening now and on stage! I can see it for myself!

Walsingham Let me remind you, that it is just a play.

Queen That's not so just!

James Don't get upset, my dear. It will soon be over.

Queen Let's hope so indeed!

James Hurray, there's my dear ghost again!

Queen You can go to blazes with your darn ghosts!

Cecil The king is perfectly right in sending his nephew to England. Such a talented young man belongs here. But listen, Lord Stanley, wasn't there a real Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? I mean, in our own time?

Stanley It's true. They were present at the court of Frederick II in Denmark.

Cecil Did you know them?

Stanley Yes.

Cecil So you wrote the text! You are the man!

Stanley The playwright got them from me. He will show up in the end.

James Isn't it master Shakespeare?

Stanley You will see.

Queen So that irresponsible playboy succeeded in driving poor Ophelia both to madness and suicide. Will he kill his mother the Queen as well?

Stanley No.

Queen This is at least no play for ladies. That's for certain.

James I think it's getting better and better.

Cecil Yes, things are starting to happen now as people begin to die.

Stanley I am afraid there will be no more ghosts, your majesty.

Queen Thank heavens!

James It doesn't matter. People are beginning to die off instead.

Cecil Now they start fighting even though they have no woman to fight for.

Walsingham The honour, Sir Robert! Honour is like a woman, for which anyone could do anything. Just look at Essex, Southampton and Sir Walter Raleigh.

Stanley So you got it out at last.

James I have heard nothing, Sir Thomas.

Walsingham *(aside)* Good for you, you incompetent shitbag!

Cecil There! Now they are all dead! Are we satisfied now?

James A splendid play, lord Stanley, the best I've seen for a long time! When can we have a second performance?

Walsingham Every day, if you wish.

Stanley Any time, your majesty.

James Call the author! You promised we would see him!

Stanley Look, there he is!

(Kit appears surprisingly dressed and masked as Shakespeare.)

Marlowe Thus was this play just a flight of thought, a dream quietly passing by unnoticed to immediately be forgotten and vanish, not even going up in air. So are we all mere mirages of air, we the living dreams, who but for a brief moment flutter by, as some kind of a glimpse of a higher truth, like a thought-provoking reminder of an appearance that we only truly can see in our mind's eye. If this dream of air could in some way possibly bring up man and make her better – then the actor's life's effort was not entirely in vain. Thanks for your interest – and forget us! *(bows)*

James *(applauds)* More! More! *(to Stanley)* Is that the writer?

Stanley Yes, your majesty, the same, the unknown actor.

James But the man is dressed up like Shakespeare. Isn't he the one?

Stanley No, he is unknown.

James Let me see! Bring on Will Shakespeare!

Stanley *(calls)* The King wishes to see William Shakespeare!

(Shakespeare appears together with Kit.)

Shakespeare *(embraces Kit)* My brother, you are the best of all.

Marlowe No, we are a team, and as such we are the best of all.

James Who is he? Off with the masks!

Marlowe Your majesty, an actor must never remove his mask. If he does, he is no longer qualified for the theatre. *(bows and quickly disappears)*

James No, don't let him go away! I want to see him! Off with the masks!

Stanley It doesn't matter, your majesty.

James What doesn't matter?

Stanley Who wrote the play. It's only the play itself that matters. Isn't it right, Will Shakespeare?

Shakespeare Yes, that's right.

James Now I got furiously thirsty. First you get both horny and hungry from such a damned good performance! Well, it doesn't matter who wrote the play, but I want to see it again soon!

Stanley As you please, your majesty.

James Away now to our supper!

Walsingham *(to Stanley)* How could you let Kit appear?

Stanley He asked for it.

Walsingham He risks his life and all our lives!

Stanley You saw for yourself the king's duplicity. In front of his very eyes there was his own family history, how his father was murdered by his own wife's lover, and he didn't even react! Elizabeth would not have contented herself with less than an execution.

Walsingham You are right. Still Kit took a great risk.

Stanley He wanted to test the king. Now he can write whatever he likes.

Walsingham And Shakespeare?

Stanley He cooperates as usual. He is the actor and director who is only grateful for each new play, whatever it contains. He is paid for it, you know. (*nudges his arm*) Come, let's join the King at his supper and keep up our good countenance in this decadent masquerade of hypocrisy and deceit which our court now has become! I chose right in preferring the theatre to the crown. What happens on the theatre is so much more sophisticated than everything that's happening in the whole banal world.

Walsingham You go alone. I am not much for royal banquets.

Stanley Perhaps you will join us later?

Walsingham Possibly.

Stanley The king will take it as a discourtesy.

Walsingham No, he is not that thoughtful. (*Stanley leaves.*)

A queen lost, who raised England to a leading country of justice and freedom like nowhere else, though cocks and adventurers like Essex and Henry Wriothesley of Southampton finally had to pay for it. And then comes this dog from Scotland demanding obedience from all England and imprisoning Sir Walter Raleigh for life, the oldest and first of Elizabethans, only because he remains a worthy Elizabethan and makes James feel what he is – worthless.

(*King James returns alone.*)

Your majesty – have you forgotten something?

James No, I am just not satisfied.

Walsingham With the performance?

James No, the play was splendid – I have never seen a better show. But I am not pleased with the poet.

Walsingham The play was good but not the author?

James I don't even know who he is!

Walsingham William Shakespeare. Who else?

James It doesn't fit. In play after play we have this motive of exile with longing melancholy heroes, unfairly dealt with who may not come home – already Romeo in exile in Mantua was like that. You can only write things like that if you have been exiled yourself.

Walsingham Your majesty is wise.

James Now I want to know who the poet is, so that I can exonerate him, if possible.

Walsingham I don't know who he is myself.

James Still he was appearing here tonight dressed up as William Shakespeare.

Walsingham It could have been someone else – symbolically.

James So you don't know who it is?

Walsingham May I come with a suggestion. Christopher Marlowe.

James Are you pulling my leg? That atheist and coiner was justly murdered in a tavern brawl.

Walsingham Then there is only William Shakespeare.

James That smug self-complacent businessman speculating in properties and houses, who has been at home all his life stuffing his greed, while he writes plays with expert knowledge from foreign lands – he is the least probable of all. Don't try to fool me.

Walsingham Then we have William Stanley.

James Many suspect him. He has been travelling all around the world and has much experience and wisdom. It could be he – and he would have his reasons to keep anonymous. He is a royal relative, and royalties don't write challenging plays. But Stanley was never exiled.

Walsingham Then I can't think of anyone else.

James Neither can I. (*rising*) Pity. Whoever he is I can't exonerate him in any way as long as I don't know who he is. – Aren't you joining the party?

Walsingham I will come presently, your majesty.

James Lucky for you. Or else I might have started suspecting you for belonging to Raleigh's party. It was he, that devilish crook, who first seduced and ruined Christopher Marlowe, and you also knew him in those days. I know you well enough, you old Elizabethans, and I know all about you!

Walsingham (*bowing*) You are wiser than I thought.

James Nobody knows me, but I know everyone! Come now, my friend, and you shall tell me everything about your cousin Sir Francis Walsingham's activities in those days! (*takes him around the shoulder, and Walsingham must follow.*)

Scene 2. Sir Walter Raleigh in prison.

Raleigh What the hell got into you, vain peacock without feathers, when you got the idea that I was an enemy of the state? Or was it the same ambitious man to bring about my fall who whispered those deadly words into the ears of Queen Elizabeth to make her execute the earl of Essex at Sir Francis Bacon's hint of an insinuation about his subversiveness or guilt? My only crime is the perpetual crime of all humanity – I failed. Broken and ruined I came home from America with my pockets plundered instead of filled, but the same did Columbus. He was not imprisoned for his failures, but I got a life sentence, like the unfortunate true peacock Henry Wriothesley of Southampton for betraying Essex to keep his own life. So this most glorious height and glory of beauty in England also turned into the deepest dishonour of falseness and cowardice. Maybe he actually deserved his life sentence for that in contrast to me. Or perhaps king James simply couldn't accept that we kept Queen Elizabeth's secrets to ourselves. Only I and Sir Thomas Walsingham are still around who know the secret of England's best agent abroad, a secret that king James could never

understand. Perhaps that is the answer. He can't stand that Elizabethans know more about certain things that he is not qualified to handle the knowledge of, which he is unconsciously conscious of and refuse to accept for himself. (*The gate is opened.*) But there is some rattling in the door.

Guard Sir Walter Raleigh, you have a visitor.

Raleigh Who is it?

Guard Don't ask me. I know nothing and want to know nothing. That's why I was also set to guard Mary Stuart and the earl of Essex and many others who got their heads chopped off. But I know nothing about that, for I wish to survive and know nothing.

Raleigh But I am not to be decapitated.

Guard You never know. (*raises a finger*) Don't be too sure! Mary Stuart was absolutely certain that Elizabeth would never dare to have her head chopped off, but she had it coming to her anyway! But I know nothing. They all took their secrets with them down the grave, and I keep their secrets with them.

Raleigh But still you must know who my guest is?

Guard Can't you understand? I know nothing! I am a grave to all my prisoners, and the grave is silent forever with what it knows whatever it knows.

Raleigh Do you mean that... (*is interrupted by Walsingham who enters*)

Walsingham My dear Sir Walter, it gives me pleasure that you seem unbroken.

Raleigh If the worst swamp fevers of South America can't break me down, then not even the worst cruelty of England could do it.

Walsingham We are working on your release. The King must realize that he has no case against you. Your chances are good.

Raleigh Don't try to bluff me, Sir Thomas. That king will never get his thumb out of his arse. Even if he knows that I am innocent it will take such a long time for him to mobilize his bureaucracy that I will die of old age before he gets to the first table of rounds.

Walsingham He is completely without Elizabeth's excellent intuition and contact with the people. It's surprising that she chose such an awkward successor.

Raleigh Power, my friend. England and Scotland together. Diplomatic triumph. That was her temptation, overwhelming enough to bring even her down.

Walsingham As always, in theory ideal, but practically devastating.

Raleigh Is he a disaster?

Walsingham He doesn't understand anything about politics and has no imagination. All he has is vanity. If the house of Stuart commences that bad, it will end even worse.

Raleigh What alternatives were there except William Stanley?

Walsingham A wise man in a difficult position. The Catholics adore him, and the puritans hate him. King James has from Elizabeth inherited the crown's suspicion against him. He would have made an ideal king, but his position would have been untenable from the start. Kit realized that when he wrote 'Hamlet', which really is all about William Stanley's dilemma.

Raleigh You dare say Kit and not William Shakespeare.

Walsingham We who know the secret are constantly getting fewer. King James is not worthy the knowledge of it. No one keeps secrets better than Henry of Navarre, and Will Shakespeare's whole career rests on it being kept. Essex is gone with Elizabeth, and Southampton never even suspected it. Left are only you and I.

Raleigh And your hired assassins.

Walsingham They have been paid to keep it, and no one suspects them.

Raleigh It was an ingenious venture. Who thought it out? You or Kit?

Walsingham We worked it out together. But Kit showed the greatest courage, who agreed to be the victim.

Raleigh Did he ever regret it?

Walsingham That you must ask himself. (*sweeps his arm backwards like to prepare the way for another, and Kit comes forth.*)

Raleigh I don't believe my eyes.

Walsingham Who would if he didn't see it for himself?

Raleigh My darling boy! (*embraces Kit*)

Marlowe Sir Walter Raleigh, we all three risk our lives in this moment, but I wanted to take the risk just to see you again.

Raleigh (*touched, cries*) It's all my fault. All your tragedy was only my fault.

Marlowe Nonsense. It was my own.

Walsingham Nonsense. You were unlucky. If you hadn't caught the eye of the government by Richard Baines damning report, you would never have been obliged to disappear underground.

Raleigh (*let's go of him, looks at him*) It was the authorities, the English inquisition, the persecution of your colleague John Penry and other free-thinkers, probably prompted by the puritans. But how do you live?

Marlowe It's all right with me. But you are worse off, Sir Walter.

Raleigh And I deserved it, because it was I who first seduced and corrupted you and brought you into dangerous company with satanists, atheists, whisky drinkers and tobacco smokers.

Marlowe But also with enlightened philosophers and scientists like Harriot and Northumberland, the Throgmortons and John Penry.

Raleigh Qualified heretics, who corrupted your soul, ruined your security and risked your life!

Marlowe I never regretted one day of my life, Sir Walter.

Raleigh Still I hear you are writing so bitter tragedies nowadays.

Marlowe It's because of the age. It's hopelessly out of joint, we all suffer from the pathetic fake king who replaced the best queen of all ages, Essex is executed betrayed by his best friend Southampton, and Lord Stanley's life is being poisoned by lawsuits fired at him by his relatives.

Raleigh What relatives? The king?

Walsingham No, it's worse than that. His deceased elder brother's widow claims that it was he who poisoned his own elder brother.

Raleigh But that's the very intrigue of Hamlet!

Walsingham But Stanley didn't do it. It was the Jesuits. But the widow demands indemnity from Stanley. In addition to that, his wife is ruining him.

Raleigh Elizabeth de Vere, the daughter of the earl of Oxford?

Walsingham She was spoiled by her father to a perpetual life of luxury, which Stanley can't afford. He will soon be ruined.

Raleigh And you, Kit? Are you also affected by this?

Marlowe No one taught me as much as Lord Stanley. I dedicated my "King Lear" to him.

Raleigh Another bitter tragedy?

Marlowe The most bitter of all. It's the story of a king who voluntarily resigns from power leaving it all to his children and is rejected by them, so that he old and in despair is driven out on the moor in madness.

Raleigh Dear me, what will become of this England?

Marlowe The fight is between Lord Stanley and the puritans. They have the real power in England. Stanley still represents the age of Elizabeth with all its best aspects, while the puritans wish to dispose of it, bury it alive, forget it and introduce an intolerant autocracy. Their religious fanaticism turn them into something of a supreme evil.

Raleigh Well, they aren't exactly amusing.

Guard You must leave now before I get to know too much.

Walsingham You realize the importance of your silence? If you tell anyone about this meeting you will lose your job and be placed in an asylum.

Guard Of course.

Walsingham Farewell, Sir Walter. See you at liberty.

Raleigh You restored a whole world to me. You gave an old man something to hope for.

Marlowe Sir Walter, I owe you the obligation to see to it that you will not become a king Lear.

Raleigh Thank you, my friend, my darling son, the best of my disciples.

(Walsingham and Marlowe leave.)

Guard Your grace, no one knows better than I that those two fellows never have been here. You had better learn that as well. *(twinkles and leaves)*

Raleigh That man has learned much from Mary Stuart and the earl of Essex. That twinkle from such a guard gives me better hopes of life and freedom than any royal pardon ever could do. Kit lives on as England's greatest secret, and the king doesn't know. Thereby the king is lost, and that is my joy.

Scene 3. A London theatre, like in Act III scene 2.

Walsingham How are things going, master Jonson?

Ben Jonson Not very well. The audience are getting tired. The theatre isn't the same public festival as it used to be.

Walsingham What's wrong?

Jonson Don't ask me. Ask the age. Ask the royal bore, whose boredom seems to infect the whole country. People are bored and yawn at the theatre faced with Shakespeare's constantly more boring spectacles.

Walsingham I know. He went from cheerful comedies and sumptuous chronicles to painful tragedies.

Jonson And do you think people can feel or appreciate that pain? No. When Julius Caesar was concluded with war and suicide, people believed it was some kind of a merry dance. Othello's strangulation of Desdemona they sense as some kind of a sensational sex murder. And all those whining misanthropes – Timon, king Lear, Coriolanus – they feel as exasperating grumblers. Our great director himself seems dissatisfied, as if it were the works of someone else he had to stage.

Walsingham But the language is all right, isn't it?

Jonson It's the language that saves the plays. Ever since the first night of "Tamburlaine the Great" twenty years ago this wonderful theatrical language has turned the theatres into a better alternative than both church and university. They say that Shakespeare never had to blot a single line. But between ourselves, I wish he had blotted some thousand. Marlowe's plays were much more concise and intensive.

Walsingham Do you mean to say that master Shakespeare is getting tired?

Jonson Yes, he seems tired. He is also troubled by some growth like a boil in one eye. They say that's what he got for crying too little over all his murdered victims' blood.

Walsingham Here he is in person. Thank you, Ben Jonson. You will go on writing plays yourself?

Jonson I don't spit them out as easily as master Shakespeare.

Walsingham But they are good. I'll never forget "Volpone" and "Every Man in his Humour".

Jonson Rare strokes of good luck.

Walsingham You are a wonderful satirist. Neither Shakespeare nor Marlowe were ever like that.

Jonson Yes, Marlowe was in "Doctor Faustus" and "Massacre at Paris". To me he is more a master than Shakespeare.

Shakespeare (entering) Welcome, Sir Thomas! You are just the man I needed to talk with. Ben Jonson, could you leave us alone?

Jonson Are there some state secrets for you to discuss? Remember what I said, Sir Thomas! (*shows his thumb up and leaves*)

Shakespeare We have a problem.

Walsingham Master Jonson said something about the audience getting bored.

Shakespeare That's not the trouble. Ben Jonson is a pedant who sees everything darkly. Just because he can't write great dramas himself, he wants to scrap the theatre and replace it with lighter entertainment. He will surely have his way in his time when I am gone.

Walsingham Are you thinking of quitting?

Shakespeare Not yet, but I have a problem with my left eye, and I feel that I don't have many years left. I am beyond the age when ordinary actors quit. No, the problem is another one. It's Timon and Coriolanus. I don't want to produce such plays any more.

Walsingham What's wrong with them?

Shakespeare Coriolanus is perhaps the most brilliant play ever written. But people don't come to the theatre to get abused from the stage or to experience how traitors of their country can be right, and the king doesn't like to see how a Scottish king is corrupted beyond repair just because he obtains power.

Walsingham You are thinking of "Macbeth".

Shakespeare I am tired of all these hopeless tragedies. Can't he write anything positive any more? If that is the case, both he and I had better quit.

Walsingham What do you wish?

Shakespeare Something really positive and uplifting, like for instance some fairy tale motive from our ancient Celtic days.

Walsingham I will convey your preference. But I sincerely hope you will continue as long as possible. The cooperation between you and our friend is the most wonderful chapter written in our English literature so far.

Shakespeare But he writes everything alone. I only make it real.

Walsingham But you get the honour and the reward while he is happy with being dead and forgotten.

Shakespeare How could he be happy with such a miserable lot?

Walsingham Because you exist, who can represent him.

Shakespeare Thank you, Sir Thomas. I will try to do my best.

Walsingham Thank you, Will Shakespeare. *(leaves)*

Shakespeare But a more serious threat than both my age and worsening eyesight is the puritan hostility against the theatre. The renaissance theatre has succeeded in driving the church out of business by stealing the public, but when the church will react with a vengeance, I will no longer wish to be at the theatre.

Scene 4.

Stanley Let me hear the worst of it.

Jonson It was nobody's fault, your grace. It was precisely at the first performance. There was a cannon fired for a salute, we always use real cannons, for the sake of the effect.

Stanley Yes, everything for the effect.

Jonson Unfortunately the cannon balls landed on the roof and set fire to it. It was just straw. You know.

Stanley So the whole theatre burned down.

Jonson Yes. Nothing could stop it.

Stanley Tough luck. And it happened to be the best and greatest theatre in London, and it happened to be at William Shakespeare's last premier. How did he take it?

Jonson We theatre people are hopelessly superstitious. We take omens seriously. William went home to Stratford and refuses to ever again set his foot on a stage.

Stanley But you have to agree it was not a very good play.

Jonson It was completely adjusted to the audience. It was completely fit to suit the king's taste. It was completely intended to soothe the taste of the public and the establishment. Formally it was a perfect play.

Stanley It was a damned arse-licking play that never should have been produced at a decent theatre!

Jonson But my lord Derby!

Stanley Pardon me. Have you met Will Shakespeare since?

Jonson Yes. He will never get over the first and last failure of his life. He takes it as a punishment by destiny. He says that he has been a slave on stage all his life and only turned his coat to the wind and been a dishonest opportunist. He feels directly and totally guilty of the entire fire disaster.

Stanley Poor fellow. That puts an end to an era. Then there will be no more Shakespeare plays.

Jonson It doesn't look like it, does it?

Stanley Has he told you what he will do with them?

Jonson That's the oddest thing of all. He doesn't care about them at all. He says that we can do with his plays whatever we wish. He doesn't want to hear anything more about them.

Walsingham Poor man. I understand him.

Jonson Do you? Can you then explain him to me? How can he be so completely self-despising and self-effacing?

Stanley It's a long story, my friend, which I have no right to divulge. You had better leave now, my good Ben Jonson, to continue writing new plays to fill out the vacuum after Shakespeare.

Jonson (rising) That void I can fill as little as anyone else.

Stanley But the king likes your masks.

Jonson Yes, I can write for money. I can be a royal arse-licker. That's all I can, Lord Stanley. I am not even a shadow of Shakespeare. *(leaves)*

Stanley (after he's gone) You could have been, my friend, if you had known who Shakespeare was. I regret that it is too late now.

Scene 5. The inn at Deptford, (like in act I scene 1).

Much people, noise and movement. Mrs Bull handles the business.

Poley (coming up to the bar) How is business, Nellie?

Mrs Bull (with a light fright at first) It was a long time since I saw you here, Bob Poley.

Poley You chose a fitting name for your pub.

Bull How long since is it? Twenty years?

Poley More.

Bull I owe all my thanks to that day. My pub has become a historical monument. Everyone is coming here to see where Kit Marlowe was murdered.

Poley Still it's all a fake and a myth.

Bull People love myths. That's what they are living for. Nothing is more exciting than a myth, especially if it isn't true and if the origin and history of its construction is veiled in an unfathomable mystery.

Bacon (has entered as a customer, reaches the bar) A strange name for a pub. Who was the poet?

Poley You were evidently born yesterday.

Bacon (offended) I apologise for my ignorance, Sir, but if this pub is called 'The Dead Poet', I could believe that you were his murderer.

Bull (interferes) 'The Dead Poet' was Christopher Marlowe, and he was actually murdered here in a brawl. I witnessed it myself.

Bacon So? How interesting! I thought he was murdered for his dangerous contacts with catholic agents abroad.

A drunken guest Kit Marlowe isn't dead. I saw him yesterday.

Bacon And who are you, my good Sir?

Guest Who are you yourself, you conceited fop?

Bacon Sir Francis Bacon, at your service.

Guest You bastard! It was you who betrayed the good and honest earl of Essex!

Bull That's enough, Paddy. You've had enough. Get out and cool down.

Guest (excusing himself) I just wanted to fight with this haughty gentleman.

Bull No fighting here. There has long ago been one brawl too much in here.

Guest And on that fight you have lived well ever since. Don't you want another? Wouldn't you like to see me knead this Bacon to some edible decency as well, to double your career? (*Mrs Bull alerts a chucker-out*)

Chucker-out Enough. Get out.

Guest Mrs Bull lives on borrowed feathers, just like Will Shakespeare! I know that Kit Marlowe lives!

Bull Get him out of here. (*The drunken guest is thrown out.*)

Poley What a place for you to visit, Sir.

Bacon The name caught my attention. So you were actually here when the dangerous poet was murdered, Mrs Bull?

Bull He wasn't that dangerous. He was as placid as a child.

Bacon How did it happen?

Bull (getting uncertain, looking at Poley for support)

Poley Tell it, Nellie. Or else I will.

Bacon Were you also present?

Poley I was sitting beside the poet's murderer.

Bacon How very interesting! Was everybody drunk, since there was a fight?

Poley We had finished eating when there was an argument about the reckoning. Kit withdrew and attacked Frizer from behind. Frizer had no chance sitting squeezed in between me and Nick Skeres and couldn't get away. He had to defend himself and thrust his dagger in Kit's eye. It was an unintended death blow.

Bacon So it was an accident?

Poley You could call it that.

Bacon But Mrs Bull just said that the poet was as placid as a child. How could he then insidiously attack a sitting man from behind?

(Poley and Bull get uncertain and exchange glances: none of them knows what to say.)

Bacon (receiving no answer) The poet was also a learned man and as intelligent as Shakespeare. He is known to never have attacked anybody and least of all from behind. Only once he was involved in a fight and against his will. There is something in your story that doesn't make sense. Have I by mistake come across an old crime? You can't answer?

Bull (after some hesitation) We know nothing.

Bacon That was the most stupid thing you could have said, Madame. You were present yourself and know nothing. That equation does not work.

Poley You had better leave, Sir.

Bacon Will you throw me out, like you did with that drunkard who talked too much? Don't you know that I am the King's own secretary?

Poley It could be dangerous to get to know too much.

Bacon That's the experience I believe young Kit Marlowe made.

Another guest (in another part of the pub) I know who you are.

A third Who is he then?

Guest 2 It's that playwright William Shakespeare, who retired to Stratford when his theatre burned down. But he never dared to show himself in London since. What are you doing here, Will Shakespeare?

Marlowe (hasn't been seen before) You have taken me for the wrong man.

Guest 2 Who are you then?

Marlowe Nobody.

2 What kind of a bloody answer is that?

Marlowe Gentlemen, I didn't come here to argue.

(The argument catches the attention of several guests, including Bacon, Poley and Mrs Bull.)

Poley (grows pale) Oh no!

Bacon What is it? You look as if you had seen a ghost.

Guest 3 So what did you come here for then?

Marlowe It's none of your business.

Bacon There seems to be interesting things going on in your pub, Mrs Bull.

Bull (to Poley) Try to get him out of here before anything happens.

3 I don't like your attitude, buddy. Either you are honest with nothing to hide, or you are in for some refreshment. Perhaps you are here for spying?

Bacon (to Mrs Bull) Do you often have fights here? I thought you said you had had one too much long ago. Well, here is another one coming up.

Marlowe I came here to visit the place of the crime.

3 What bloody crime?

Marlowe The murder of Christopher Marlowe.

2 Have you never been here before?

Marlowe No, never.

2 But I am sure that I have seen you somewhere. Are you sure you are not Will Shakespeare?

Marlowe Absolutely. He is at home in Stratford.

2 How do you know?

Marlowe Is this a cross examination?

2 No, but I do recognize you. If you aren't Will Shakespeare you must be Christopher Marlowe, but he is dead, so you must still be Will Shakespeare. They were almost as like each other as twins.

Poley (calls) Leave him alone.

2 And who are you commanding us? Do you know this bloke who talks so fine and still denies being Will Shakespeare?

Poley (coming over. Mrs Bull feels some relief for his interference.) I am one of them who were present when Kit Marlowe died. I helped Mrs Bull start this pub in his name after that.

3 Then perhaps you know where to find his grave. I always wondered about that.

Poley What will you do there? Throw some water on it?

Marlowe My grave is the theatre.

(Everybody falls quiet.)

2 *(meaningly)* He is a philosopher.

3 Explain yourself, stranger.

Marlowe My grave is the theatre. I have no other grave and will never have any other grave.

2 He talks in riddles.

3 We can't guess your riddle, pal. Give us a clue.

Marlowe The theatre has burned down. Will Shakespeare has gone home. There will be no more plays in Will Shakespeare's name.

Bacon This is getting more and more interesting.

2 We are nearing the truth! More clues!

Marlowe I am dead but have no grave. The theatre is my only grave, and therefore I will never die.

3 *(dissatisfied)* This is getting too tricky. I can't follow.

Poley (calling) I can solve the riddle. You must be Kit Marlowe.

2 But he is dead, isn't he?

3 *(frightened, to Kit)* Then you must be his ghost.

Marlowe I am no ghost. I give you my thanks, gentlemen. The show is over. You will never see me again. (*wants to leave*)

2 Stop! Wait!

Bacon You really have a mystery in your pub, Mrs Bull.

Bull Yes, I should close up immediately.

Poley No, Nellie, this is good for business.

2 Let's sort this out piece by piece. You are not Will Shakespeare, and Kit Marlowe is dead. Are you then Ben Jonson?

3 He doesn't look like it, stupid.

2 But I remember Kit Marlowe. He was a small man of your own size. Are you his brother?

3 Give us more clues.

Poley (calling) Kit, Mrs Bull wants you to leave. She wants no more mysteries in her pub.

2 You called him Kit! So you must be Kit Marlowe.

Marlowe I assure you, gentlemen, that Kit Marlowe is dead.

Bacon The man is right. There are two witnesses here who were present at the poet's death twenty years ago.

3 Then you must still be a ghost.

Marlowe (offers his hand) Touch me and feel my hand. (*3 receives his hand. They shake hands.*)

3 He lives!

2 Kit Marlowe lives!

Poley (calling) Long live Kit Marlowe!

Bull (falling in) May the dead poet live forever!

Poley Cheers for Kit Marlowe!

Bacon (shares the toast but with hesitation) Most strange indeed.

Poley What, Sir?

Bacon There is something wrong here.

Poley Could there possibly be something rotten in your state?

Bacon That sounded like a quotation.

Poley So it was.

Bacon Of Christopher Marlowe?

Poley No. William Stanley.

Bacon I give up. (*will leave, looks around for Kit, but he has disappeared as unnoticeably as he showed up. Bacon shrugs his shoulders and leaves. The pub life continues as if nothing had happened. Poley returns to being like any other visitor, and Mrs Bull returns to business as usual.*)

Epilogue.

Bacon (before the curtain) I could never fathom the mystery. I found that many suspected William Stanley for being the author of William Shakespeare's works, but William Stanley's complete works and documents were destroyed when the puritans burned his castle in the civil war. Thereby we shall never know what part William Stanley played in Shakespeare's works. Christopher Marlowe's patron Sir Thomas Walsingham died in 1630. His tomb was opened 325 years later in the hopes of finding a clue as to what part he played in Shakespeare's works by possible manuscripts in his coffin, but the coffin was utterly empty. Sir Thomas was not in his own grave, and we were only one mystery the richer.

All we know for sure about William Shakespeare's part in the works published in his name by probably William Stanley and Sir Thomas Walsingham is, that he actually played several parts in these plays in the theatre.

(bows and leaves.)

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