

HOLY AND UNRULY

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A Play in Two Acts

by

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## SYNOPSIS

June 1593. At the height of her powers as monarch, disturbing dreams, bewildering visions, and inexplicable moments of panic plague England's Queen Elizabeth. A petition for justice from Grace O'Malley, an aristocratic Irish pirate feared from England to North Africa, brings the Queen's emotional crisis to a head.

Grace's hard-won influence and resilient independence provoke the Queen to reexamine choices she made to retain her own power and autonomy, choices no man in her position ever faced. Does Grace's example imply that the Queen sacrificed needlessly? This possibility haunts the Queen.

When they meet, two of Europe's most charismatic women wrestle with questions that remain relevant nearly half a millennium later: What does it take to rule your world? What are the costs?

Running time: 1:45-2:00

Characters: 10 (6 men, 3 women, 1 gender neutral)

Cast Size: 8 (3 men, 3 women, 2 gender neutral)

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

QUEEN ELIZABETH I, the aging Queen of England (60, female)  
GRACE O'MALLEY, an Irish pirate and aristocrat (60s, female)  
LORD BURGHLEY, the Queen's most trusted advisor (70s, male)  
ESSEX, a young and arrogant advisor to the Queen (mid 20s, male)  
CONROY, a brave and intelligent member of Grace's crew (40, male)  
MACNALLY, a young and reckless member of Grace's crew (20s, female)  
DUDLEY, the Queen's long-dead love (40s, any gender)  
THE UNBORN, the Queen's never-conceived child (teens, any gender)  
LADY SCOTT, the Queen's Lady of the Bedchamber (20s, female)  
BINGHAM, sadistic English Governor of County Mayo (50s, male)

## SETTING

Greenwich, England. June, 1593.

## SCENE LOCATIONS

I-1: The Queen's bedchamber, Greenwich Palace  
I-2: Grace's ship, Thames River, near Greenwich Palace  
I-3: The Queen's bedchamber, Greenwich Palace  
II-1: Multiple locations, Greenwich Palace  
II-2: The Queen's bedchamber, Greenwich Palace  
II-3: Grace's ship, Thames River, near Greenwich Palace  
II-4: A dining room, Greenwich Palace

## PRODUCTION NOTES

The actress who plays Lady Scott should also play MacNally, an ironic nod to the Elizabethan requirement that male actors play female characters.

The actor who plays Conroy can be dual cast as Bingham.

Dudley and The Unborn are figments of the Queen's imagination, not ghosts. Both should seem shadowy and impermanent. While it would be fine for Dudley to be identifiable as male, neither character's gender need be obvious, and either could be played by a woman. The Unborn's gender should, under no circumstances, be apparent. I would prefer that actors carrying puppets portray Dudley and The Unborn to emphasize that they are neither ghosts nor fully human. These should be hand-held puppets that allow the actors to move freely and naturally, not marionettes on strings.

## ACT I

## SCENE 1

*Greenwich Palace. Queen Elizabeth's bedchamber.*

*Crowd noise is audible through the windows. Queen Elizabeth is asleep in her bed and having a nightmare. We experience her dream as sound, light and shadow: A body dangles grotesquely from a noose; water laps and boats creak faintly at anchor; a raven caws and a raven-like shadow swoops past the dangling corpse; insects buzz. The Unborn enters, young, of indefinite gender, neither ghost nor entirely human. Its presence distresses the Queen. A second figure enters, Dudley, more man-like, but also neither living nor ghost. His presence calms the Queen. The crowd noise intensifies, and the Queen wakes with a start. Her dream shadows vanish. Dudley and The Unborn remain. She sees Dudley...*

QUEEN ELIZABETH

(Disoriented)

Robert?... Is that you, Eyes?

She recognizes him, grows calmer.  
She sits up, sees The Unborn.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Who might this be, Robert? This... undesired shadow? You are all I need, my love.

The Queen rises.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Be gone. Whatever you are, be gone!

The Unborn scowls and exits. The Queen watches it off. Her spirits lift. She walks to a window.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

The natives are restless, Eyes. What could have them stirred to such a froth?

(Calling off stage)

Lady Scott!... Lady Scott!

Lady Scott enters.

LADY SCOTT

Good morrow, your majesty.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Send for Lord Burghley. Then return. I am ready to dress.

LADY SCOTT

Yes, ma'am.

Lady Scott exits. The Queen studies the windows. Dudley glides to her with amorous intentions.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

That will be quite enough from you, Robert Dudley.

She pushes him away playfully. Lady Scott enters with an armful of clothes. She and the Queen go behind a dressing screen. The Queen exclaims in frustration, Lady Scott stammers in apology. Dressing is a contact sport.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

God's teeth! Let me breathe.

She emerges, half dressed. Lady Scott emerges and waits. The Queen scowls and gestures at the window.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

What is all this hurly-burly?

LADY SCOTT

Pray pardon, Your Grace. I know not.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Has Burghley come?

LADY SCOTT

Pray pardon, ma'am. I know not.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Pray pardon. Know not. Pray pardon. Know not. Sniff it out!  
And send him in!

LADY SCOTT

Ma-Majesty?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

What?

LADY SCOTT

Pray... uh... Should you first finish dressing?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Ha! If anyone knows my unadorned truths, it is Burghley.  
Send him in, Lady Scott.

Lady Scott bows, begins to exit.  
Queen and Dudley move to window.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

When there is a commotion stirring, Eyes, normal people  
throw open their shutters and have a look. We send for the  
Lord High Treasurer!

Lady Scott, out of sight of the  
Queen, hears her speaking to  
"Eyes" and reacts with  
consternation. The Queen eyes a  
nearby footstool.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

By God, I shall do it!

She moves stool to window. Dudley  
is alarmed.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Stand back, Robert. I will give them something to buzz about. Let them see their Queen, unpolished and true.

She mounts the stool and reaches for the shutters. There's a knock at her door. Lord Burghley enters, bowing. Dudley spreads his arms to shield the Queen.

BURGHLEY

Your Majesty. I wish you good morrow.

The Queen freezes, her ass thrust indecorously toward the door. Burghley straightens up.

BURGHLEY

Let me... Wh-... Pray, Ma'am, what is this?

Burghley moves past or through Dudley toward the Queen.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

I am opening my shop for the day, Lord Burghley.

BURGHLEY

Your shop, ma'am?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Casting forth my shutters like some common monger... or...  
(Glancing at herself)  
Some grizzled madam. I care not. Let them see.

BURGHLEY

You are still dressing, ma'am. I should wait outside.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Oh, fie! I daresay you cannot spare the time. Do you know how long it takes your Queen to become her queenly self? Stay... and, I pray you... tell me what is happening outside. I was dreaming of... of... Lord Dudley.

(Smiling mischievously)

The din interrupted us at a... pleasant moment. It has yet to cease!

BURGHLEY

The moment?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

The din!

BURGHLEY

Well, ma'am, the riverfront is buzzing. Grace O'Malley docked this very morn.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Go to! The pirate? She received a queen's welcome!

BURGHLEY

It feels more like a gallows crowd, ma'am, a gathering for one who is... notorious.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Notorious! The line between notoriety and fame is faint, Lord Burghley, and it moves! Today's gallows mob is tomorrow's adoring crowd. We have seen it.

BURGHLEY

We have, your Grace.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Well! This is a momentous day. Truly, a momentous day!

(Calling off stage)

Lady Scott! There is a pirate queen in town. Come! Let us show my subjects how a real queen comports herself.

Lady Scott enters. Burghley bows,  
makes to exit.

BURGHLEY

Your Majesty.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Stay, Burghley. There is more I wish to discuss.

The Queen and Lady Scott step back  
behind the screen.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

What is your opinion regarding O'Malley's petition? I have a strong inclination to see her, you know.

BURGHLEY

Pray pardon, ma'am. My opinion is not fully formed. In troth, I was not certain she would come.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Not certain she would come! Grace O'Malley strikes me as a woman who does as promised.

BURGHLEY

Or as threatened.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Aye. And yet... you doubted?

BURGHLEY

Doubted is too strong. Wondered? Think of the risk. A known pirate sailing up the Thames to Greenwich.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Piracy is just the start. She is Catholic. And a rebel. That she has lived sixty-odd years is...

BURGHLEY

Miraculous?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Nay! That is a word for Popes and priests. It diminishes her. It is... energizing. My God, but she intrigues me.

Queen peers around screen.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

(Playfully)

I am tempted to add her to my Privy Council. What say you to that?

BURGHLEY

A Catholic, Irish, pirate, woman... on the Privy Council? That would bring a new perspective. But methinks Lord Essex might finally lose his mind.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

A brilliant reason! Essex needs taming. Grace O'Malley is just the woman to do it.

BURGHLEY

I can think of another, ma'am.

The Queen emerges, followed by Lady Scott. She wears a gown, but no wig or make up.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

(To Lady Scott)

Leave us. My hair and face can wait.

Lady Scott bows and exits.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Are you flirting with me, My Lord Treasurer?

BURGHLEY

Perchance, ma'am. At my age, I am good for little else... However, if I may speak seriously?

He pauses. The Queen gestures for him to continue.

BURGHLEY

We should approach this visit with care. The politics are tricky.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

You are the expert on tricky politics.

BURGHLEY

I have a letter from Governor Bingham.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Oh, fie! You said politics, not torture.

Lights up on a stage within the stage. We see Sir Richard Bingham.

BURGHLEY

Bingham knows that O'Malley has come hither... and he has divined her reasons.

Burghley ands the Queen the letter. Bingham rises in a jerky, loose-jointed way like a puppet.

As the Queen reads, this puppet-like Bingham narrates.

BINGHAM

To the Right Honorable Lord Burghley, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. If it please your honorable good Lord, Grace O'Malley journeys to Greenwich for a lone and villainous reason: to drive a wedge between her glorious majesty and her glorious majesty's most loyal servant... me.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

He struts like a peacock, even on parchment.

BURGHLEY

He is only warming up, ma'am.

BINGHAM

She pesters you, my honorable Lord, and seeks to pollute the court of our most radiant Queen, because my boot is on her neck. I am choking the life from her and all the other barbarians who infest this island.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

One boot, so many necks. Our governor has big feet.

BURGHLEY

And a bigger ego.

BINGHAM

As long as this foul wench and her pustulating sons could put up a fight, they had no need for our most noble Queen. Because of me, they are staggering, so they crawl to her gracious Majesty for help.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

God-a-mercy... enough!

Thrusts letter back at Burghley.

BURGHLEY

Pray, ma'am, a moment more. You know his flair for endings.

The Queen relents, reads.

BINGHAM

Do not be fooled, my honorable Lord Burghley. And do not allow our great but motherly queen...

The Queen and Bingham speak the next lines simultaneously.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Motherly... MOTHERLY!

BINGHAM

...to be fooled by the feral charisma of this subhuman female.

Lights down on the stage within the stage. Bingham exits.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

As God is my witness, Burghley, I will have that... that... man... disemboweled. I will show him motherly. I will have his heart jerked out through his ass. Then he will know the courage and strength of mothers! What is he thinking?

BURGHLEY

He is undoubtedly...

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Silence! Does that wretched worm make all men insufferable know-it-alls?... Well, Lord Burghley?

BURGHLEY

I beg forgiveness, ma'am. Your question seemed rhetorical.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Bravo! It was! But now I would like to know your thoughts. What plan hatches in that scheming, spymaster's mind?

BURGHLEY

It takes no scheming to know that Governor Bingham's tongue turns meaning inside out.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

However...

BURGHLEY

However, truth can be coaxed from the most acrobatic speech.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Truth?

BURGHLEY

Aye. He is warning us to be wary of O'Malley. On that point, I am in agreement with this otherwise disagreeable Governor. Her visit could enflame the Irish clans at a time when our war with Spain demands relentless focus.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

(With a sigh)

You speak relentless truth... as always. Aye, we shall be cautious, as weary as that prospect makes me feel.

BURGHLEY

It pains me to think of you as weary, ma'am.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Oh, I should not burden you with pedestrian complaints. Keep your focus wide, and fixed on our horizons.

BURGHLEY

I have counseled you too long for that line of reasoning to gain purchase. You may tell me what troubles you. I do you poor service otherwise.

Dudley and Unborn enter. Unborn glides toward Queen, distracting her; this puzzles Burghley.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

God grant you mercy, Lord Burghley. The poor service is mine. I am merely being peevish. Defeating Spain is everything. My beginning. My middle. My end.

LORD BURGHLEY

And a noble story it shall be, ma'am. One, might I add, in which Grace O'Malley's ships could play a useful role.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Her ships? Do I hear an argument in favor of seeing her, Lord Burghley?

As the Queen's focus returns, The Unborn drifts back toward Dudley. Eventually, they exit.

LORD BURGHLEY

Perchance, but before that pudding sets, let me ply my trade.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Exhume her true intentions?

LORD BURGHLEY

If it please you, ma'am.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Very well. But work with haste. Life at court grows swiftly stale. Dawdle, and you risk finding my shutters thrown wide. Damn the consequences.

LORD BURGHLEY

Good now, your Majesty.

He bows, exits. It is silent outside, but Queen climbs onto stool, opens a shutter, breathes.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Suddenly, this Greenwich summer smells sweet. We are boarded. Boarded, I say! It makes me feel alive!

She exits.

BLACKOUT

END OF SCENE

## ACT I

## SCENE 2

*Thames River, Greenwich,  
England. Grace O'Malley's ship,  
docked near Greenwich Palace.*

*A cabin, at stage level, extends  
from stage center to stage left.  
A door leads to a stretch of  
open deck that extends to stage  
right. A mast with an unfurled  
sail is visible at stage right.  
The deck is well below dock  
level. A gangplank extends from  
the deck up to the dock. Grace,  
Conroy and MacNally enter the  
open deck from behind the back  
wall of the cabin.*

## MACNALLY

What a welcome! All those fair English maids, so ripe...  
and just waiting to be plucked!

He rubs his hands gleefully.  
Grace's look says "boys will be  
boys." Conroy is dismayed.

## CONROY

If they taste as sour as they look, I leave the sampling to  
you, MacNally. As welcomes go, that seemed fraught.

MacNally strides up the gangplank.  
Conroy tosses him a lanyard.  
MacNally ties off the ship.

## MACNALLY

My charm is like fresh cream. It turns sour pusses sweet.

He grins lewdly and comes down the  
gangplank to the deck.

## MACNALLY

By my faith, Conroy. I never knew you to be unmanned by a  
challenge.

CONROY

A challenge? Out upon it! We are miles up the Thames with no support. You speak as if we are stealing pies for sport. Perchance you marked the corpses hanging in those cages back a piece?

GRACE

Gentlemen! Pray, come hither. Make no scenes on deck.

She leads them to the cabin,  
closes the door, turns to Conroy.

GRACE

We marked the corpses, Conroy.

She waves her hand as if to  
disperse an unpleasant smell.

GRACE

They were ripe old pirates. Hard to miss.

(To MacNally)

Near as ripe as you, MacNally. Find a bath and quick, or you will charm naught but English pigs.

Macnally laughs.

CONROY

Pray, do not encourage him, Grace. His foolishness is like to be our doom.

GRACE

Unbend yourself, Conroy. MacNally is young, but no clodpole.

(To MacNally)

Am I right, good fellow?

She throws an arm around  
MacNally's shoulders and speaks as  
if needing reassurance.

GRACE

'Tis no time for a mouse hunt, son. Steer the maidens a wide course. Understood?

MACNALLY

Ah, Grace.

GRACE

Understood?

MACNALLY

Aye, aye, Captain.

GRACE

Woo all the girls you like... but after we see the Queen.

CONROY

If we see the Queen. Methinks we are more like to meet her executioner.

GRACE

That can be the price of piracy, Conroy. Ye knew as much.

CONROY

I never knew we would be fashioning our own nooses. I like it not.

GRACE

Aye. You have been clear on that. But here we are.

CONROY

What stops us from sailing back? If you want my opinion...

MACNALLY

We have had naught save your opinion for days. Stand to, man. 'Tis not as if we came without reason. The Queen all but begged.

CONROY

Aye... all but.

GRACE

Come now, Conroy.

CONROY

The distinction matters.

GRACE

Aye. But how else shall I get me my son and my ships?

CONROY

How else? Lay siege to Bingham's castle. Take them back!

MACNALLY

Here, here!

GRACE

(To MacNally)

Pray pardon? On whose side might you be?

MACNALLY

The side of action! Be it here or back home.

GRACE

Go easy. You understand the risks we run, do you not?

MACNALLY

Ahhhh.

GRACE

A plague on you, MacNally. Do not make me rue the day I granted you leave to come.

MACNALLY

I am destined to rue that day if you do not. But very well, I shall be a modest lamb. Just give the horse a flick, I pray you. Send a message to the palace.

GRACE

A message? You saw the crowd. Our arrival is old news.

MACNALLY

So we wait?... How long?

GRACE

As long as good lady patience demands.

MacNally groans, turns away.

CONROY

Grace... we cannot simply sit and wait. This is no place for the likes of us.

GRACE

The likes of us? Since when did seafaring traders have aught to fear in Greenwich?

CONROY

Seafaring traders! A moment ago you spoke of piracy and its price.

GRACE

For now, we are seafaring traders.

CONROY

And if the Queen's men have a differing view?

GRACE

The Queen's men answer to the Queen.

CONROY

You know my meaning.

There's a tense silence. Grace's look and tone soften.

GRACE

Aye. I do.

CONROY

So?

GRACE

So?... So, the odds are nie even that we ne'er see home again.

MACNALLY

If so, Grace, I see little to be gained in laying low.

He heads for the door.

GRACE

Stand down, MacNally! If we call attention to ourselves the odds worsen. The Queen will summon us anon.

MACNALLY

And then you will convince her to free Tibbott and return your ships?

CONROY

Why should she side with you? She made Bingham governor.

GRACE

We have sailed past this rock before.

CONROY

Mayhap... but I still need convincing.

GRACE

I suspect there are moments she regrets appointing Bingham. He spends most of his time seeking to exterminate us.

MACNALLY

And the Queen does not?

CONROY

Grace is right. The Queen cannot afford to take Ireland by force, not while she is fighting Spain. No doubt, she would prefer that Bingham take a less bloody approach.

MACNALLY

Women!

GRACE

Mind your tongue, MacNally.

CONROY

But that does not mean she will humiliate her own Governor, not without getting some significant bauble in return.

GRACE

And you think that bauble is a pledge from me to join her fight with Spain?

CONROY

Are you prepared to give so much?

Grace glances at MacNally, uneasy.

CONROY

Are you?

MACNALLY

Peace. No one talks of backing England.

GRACE

If she overplays her hand, we will offer our thanks and sail home.

CONROY

By my faith! Should we turn them down, do you think they will smile and give a friendly wave as we sail away? That is when we will get the pirate's tour of Executioner's Dock.

GRACE

Well, if that should happen, MacNally will get his fight.

MACNALLY

Now by my faith! Good now!

CONROY

I pray you, Grace. Do not risk this. Sail home. I will gladly support any other plan.

(Nodding at MacNally)

Even if it means unleashing Sir Blood-and-Guts to recover Tibbott and the ships by force.

MACNALLY

I could do it, Grace. Give me twenty men and, by God, I will sail Tibbott and your ships home myself... with Bingham tied to the mast for good measure.

GRACE

I would not bet against you MacNally. If you live past thirty, you will make a mighty splash... but that remains an if. For now, follow my lead.

Both men indicate grudging assent.  
Burghley enters.

BURGHLEY

(From the dock)

Ahoy. I seek the ship of Grace O'Malley.

MacNally dashes to a porthole.

MACNALLY

Some musty gaffer. Should I run him off?

GRACE

No.

CONROY

Mayhap it is Burghley.

Grace exits to the deck. MacNally  
and Conroy follow.

GRACE

Who might you be, noble sir?

BURGHLEY

I am William Cecil... Lord Burghley... the Queen's...

GRACE

The Queen's Lord High Treasurer. This is the ship you seek.

BURGHLEY

(Over his shoulder)

This is the one.

Stagehands enter, place empty  
suits of armor on either side of  
Burghley and then exit.

BURGHLEY

Pray, may we come aboard, Lady O'Malley?

GRACE

(Indicating Burghley)

You are welcome, Lord Burghley.

(Indicating the armor)

They must remain on the dock.

BURGHLEY

As you wish.

(To the armor)

Wait here.

He moves gingerly down gangplank.

MACNALLY

(Aside to Grace)

Should he fall, do not look to me to fish him out.

BURGHLEY

My Lady, on behalf of her majesty, Queen Elizabeth, I  
welcome you to Greenwich.

GRACE

Many thanks, Lord Burghley. It is my dearest hope that you come bearing more than welcome. Am I to visit the palace?

BURGHLEY

In good time, my Lady. The Queen first seeks to know more of your intentions. And she asked that I give you these.

He passes tokens to Grace.

GRACE

What might these be, my Lord?

BURGHLEY

They bear the Queen's seal and will guarantee your safety.

Grace passes the tokens to Conroy.

GRACE

I am eager to present my suit to the Queen. Whatever information she desires I will hasten to provide.

Burghley takes a document from his cloak, passes it to Grace.

BURGHLEY

Welcome words, my Lady. These pages explain all.

Grace takes the document.

BURGHLEY

May I ask you one thing now?

Grace nods, waits.

BURGHLEY

You are a trader, are you not?

GRACE

Pray pardon?

BURGHLEY

A trader.

GRACE

I daresay trader is a tricky-sounding word, Lord Burghley. It can be misheard... in treasonous fashion.

BURGHLEY

Treasonous?... Ah, yes. Indeed. Let me hone my tongue. Are you, perchance, prepared to make a trade with the Queen?

GRACE

I am willing to listen.

BURGHLEY

Good, my Lady. We make a promising start.

GRACE

Be that as it may, Do not to assume you hold the stronger hand... simply because you hold my son.

MACNALLY

Aye. The Spanish have the Queen by the tits... and they are twisting.

GRACE

MacNally!

BURGHLEY

Quite all right. He is spirited... much like your Tibbott.

GRACE

What know you of Tibbott?

BURGHLEY

I receive reports from Governor Bingham on a regular basis.

GRACE

Can you guarantee Tibbott's safety until I see the Queen?

BURGHLEY

It is done, my Lady. You have my word.

GRACE

Many thanks. If that be so, you may count on my open mind.

BURGHLEY

The Queen will be pleased. But now, I should be going.

(Indicating the papers)

May I send someone to collect your answers tomorrow?

GRACE

Aye. That will be fine.

BURGHLEY

Good day, Lady O'Malley.

They exchange nods. Burghley exits up the gangplank. Stagehands enter and follow him off with the armor.

MACNALLY

(Indicating the papers)

What does it say?

GRACE

We should talk inside.

They return to the cabin. Grace breaks the seal, reads.

MACNALLY

Well?

GRACE

It is... questions.

CONROY

What?

GRACE

A series of questions... Clerks and lawyers.

CONROY

What did you say?

GRACE

Clerks and lawyers. Burghley may bear a fancy title, but he is still one of Elizabeth's clerks.

MACNALLY

Pray, speak more clearly.

CONROY

She means that the Queen cannot take Ireland by force. She uses laws instead. And land deeds. And fancy titles. Clerks and lawyers, not soldiers.

MACNALLY

Jesus. This ain't pirating.

GRACE

The Queen seeks to make us all more English. Clerks and lawyers are oft' better suited to that task than soldiers.

CONROY

This is not the first time we have faced such tactics.

GRACE

What mean you?

CONROY

She wants us to be more English, just as the Vikings wanted us to be more Norse. We have dealt with foreign invaders for centuries. I am still Irish.

GRACE

(Indicating MacNally)

He is Irish. See the vacant stare? You are a pain in the arse. But you keep me honest, and I am glad to have you.

MACNALLY

(Nodding at the papers)

What does all this mean... for us... here and now?

GRACE

It means we have better odds of seeing the Queen, but she cannot simply invite a pirate to court.

CONROY

We are pirates again? I thought we were seafaring traders.

GRACE

(Waving the papers)

Only if we answer well.

She moves to a nearby table.

GRACE

Now... let me be. This is risky business, but I have won with weaker hands.

MACNALLY

Good! You write. We will put those safe passage tokens to good use.

He exits to the deck and up the gangplank. Grace turns to Conroy.

GRACE

Keep a weather eye on him.

Conroy nods, begins to exit.

GRACE

Conroy?

(He turns back)

You may be right about the Queen's expectations, and you deserve to know my mind.

(Pause)

I am ready to sail in any direction. Understood?

CONROY

Aye. But you can't be with England in the fight with Spain and against them at home.

GRACE

I understand, but we have not survived this long by being idealistic.

CONROY

Agreed.

GRACE

Keep this close for now. We must ease MacNally along.

(Conroy nods)

Now, be gone. Keep him out of trouble.

Conroy exits. Grace watches him off and then begins to write.

BLACKOUT

END OF SCENE

## ACT I

## SCENE 3

*Greenwich Palace, the Queen's  
bedchamber.*

*Several days have passed. Lady  
Scott is dressing the Queen.  
Dudley is giving the Unborn a  
dancing lesson. They twirl  
around the room.*

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Are you finished, Lady Scott?

LADY SCOTT

Almost, Your Grace.

The Queen fidgets. A clock chimes.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

The clock again! My father had shorter marriages.

LADY SCOTT

Just your wig, ma'am.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

I can do it. Leave me! Send for Fop and Doodle.

LADY SCOTT

Ma'am?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Lord Burghley and Lord Essex.

LADY SCOTT

Yea, ma'am.

Lady Scott exits. Dancing lesson  
over, Dudley and Unborn lounge.  
Queen picks up a stack of papers.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

(To Dudley)

I read Burghley's thoughts on the O'Malley questionnaire. She has been waiting days for a response. The walls must loom close by now.

Dudley expresses amusement. The Queen picks up different papers.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Here are O'Malley's actual answers.

The Unborn begins dancing solo.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Generally, Burghley's summary would do, but there is something about this woman, Eyes. I desire my impressions unfiltered by men... God's blood it was slow reading. About as interesting as Privy Council minutes... How was it that she referred to her piracy?

(Shuffling papers)

Here it is, "maintenance by sea." Ha! "Maintenance!" What rubbish. I daresay she would "maintain" herself well on the Council.

(Reads)

She bears no love for Governor Bingham. We have that in common.

(Reads)

If half her claims are true, she has cause to hate. Bingham locked her up... threatened her with hanging... and he had a hand in killing her oldest son.

(Glancing up)

She was wise to have spares, eh Robert? The dutiful wife.

(Returns to reading)

Now, Bingham has taken some of her ships... and he holds her youngest son. What was his name?

(Shuffles papers)

Aye. Here. Tibbott.

(Looks up, inquiringly)

Is he the one she bore while battling Algerian pirates? Or is he the son she attacked some years back for surrendering to Bingham?

Dudley shrugs.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

She stormed her own son's castle.

Hearing talk of battle, The Unborn  
shifts to mock sword play.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

She is ferocious.

Gestures at The Unborn.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

That is the Grace O'Malley I am keen to meet. Not this...  
this...

(Waving the papers)

Bureaucrat of the seas.

(Examines the papers)

Burghley wants me to give her what she asks: Free Tibbott.  
Return her ships. In exchange he wants a pledge: O'Malley's  
fleet joins the war with Spain.

(Looking up at Dudley)

Pray tell me, what's the point? Negotiating for pledges? I  
am the daughter of a broken pledge... and I have broken  
enough of them myself... Verily, I know the measly value of  
a pledge. Besides, her fleet is small. Its impact on  
Spain...

Her voice trails off wearily.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Oh, Robert. This entire affair begins to feel  
transactional. I seek... transformation.

Dudley looks sympathetic. The  
Unborn flops in a chair, bored.  
There's a knock at the door, which  
the Queen seems not to hear.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Mayhap I should not crave more, Eyes. Even when a pirate  
comes to town. But... just once. Just...

(Another knock)

Oh, come! Damn you!

Burghley and Essex enter.

ESSEX

An exceedingly good morrow, Most Gracious Majesty. God's bottom you are comely this morning. Pray, what have you done with your hair?

He grins playfully. The Queen glances at the wig in her hands, flashes a weary but bemused smile.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Save it for court, Lord Essex. It is unseemly to flirt in my bedchamber.

ESSEX

Ah, but bedchambers are ideal for flirting, my gorgeous Gloriana... My beauteous Queen Bess.

The Queen rolls her eyes, but smiles. Burghley looks uneasy.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

We should get to our business... if only for the sake of Lord Burghley's nerves.

She smiles at Essex, who grins. Dudley and Unborn circle and exit.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

I read your thoughts on the pirate queen, Lord Burghley. Do you really think her skills at... maintenance... would give the Spanish fits?

BURGHLEY

I do, ma'am. Aye.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

(To Essex)

And you agree?

ESSEX

Mayhap.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Mayhap?

ESSEX

I would be glad to have her men and ships, ma'am. This just seems...

QUEEN ELIZABETH

(After a pause)

Well, Lord Essex. This just seems...?

ESSEX

It seems desperate, ma'am.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Desperate? Because she is a pirate?

(Essex avoids her gaze.)

Because she is Irish?

(Essex looks uncomfortable.)

I see. Desperate because she is a woman. Worry not, my ambitious young general. I am as yet disinclined to replace you.

ESSEX

You mistake me, ma'am...

The Queen cuts him off. Essex gives a puppet-like jerk and slumps in the loose-jointed manner of a puppet at rest. As the scene continues, the Queen sweeps her hands in the air, causing Essex to jerk about the stage like a dancing marionette.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

You are an open book, Lord Essex. It is impossible to mistake your meaning.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

All this talk of ships... and the war with Spain... it tires me greatly, Lord Burghley.

BURGHLEY

Ma'am?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

She has a small fleet. Of what use would she really be?

BURGHLEY

All help is too the good, ma'am. And the symbolism...

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Ah... She would simply mouth the pledge and go about her business, like always. Pray tell me... when Bingham seized her all those years ago, what promise won her freedom?

BURGHLEY

She pledged to follow English law, ma'am.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Aye. And did she?

BURGHLEY

She did not, ma'am.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

And when we agreed to honor her late-husband's elevation to clan chief in Mayo, did they not also agree to follow English law?

BURGHLEY

Aye, ma'am. And falsely again.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Yet, here we stand, speaking of another pledge. We are dogs chasing our tails.

She gestures in disgust. Essex begins moving normally again. He rejoins the conversation.

ESSEX

So you are going to refuse to see her, ma'am?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Refuse? Nay. I shall see her, Lord Essex. And I shall give her back the son and ships she seeks.

BURGHLEY

What exchange are you contemplating, ma'am?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

My terms are simple: I seek gossip between girls.

ESSEX

You would demand nothing of her?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Never nothing! I would demand a chat, Lord Essex, with a healthy dollop of giggling. What say you to that?

Essex stares. The Queen smiles.

BURGHLEY

If I may be so bold, Your Grace. Perchance there is another option?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Go on. I fear you must.

BURGHLEY

We could make her a privateer, lift the stain of piracy from her name.

ESSEX

Do you think she would leave our ships alone?

BURGHLEY

It would be in her interest to do so.

ESSEX

For what percentage?

BURGHLEY

The standard share. Though I fear it may be hard to collect.

ESSEX

Hard? It will be nie impossible. She will rob us blind.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

She does that already, Lord Essex.

BURGHLEY

Collecting is the least of our worries. If she leaves our ships alone, we are better off.

The Queen appears disinterested.

BURGHLEY

She must not feel coerced, ma'am. It will require a subtle presentation.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

We are English, Lord Burghley.

Burghley smiles knowingly.

BURGHLEY

Shall we inform the Council? Set the cart in motion?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

I see no reason to ask anything of this woman.

ESSEX

We cannot release a traitor from custody and return ships to a known pirate without getting something in exchange.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

But we can, Lord Essex. A word from me is all it takes.

ESSEX

She is the widow of minor clan chiefs...

BURGHLEY

Lord Essex...

ESSEX

Do not make her seem significant.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

She is a leader in Ireland. And she is feared from here to Africa. She is significant... all on her own.

(To herself)

Could any English woman have achieved as much?

ESSEX

Why, you have achieved far more, ma'am. You and your sister.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

My sister! Mary served herself on a platter to be consumed by men like you, Lord Essex. The day she married Philip of Spain, she became a womb. Nothing more.

ESSEX

But you, ma'am. You are the most powerful woman in the world. O'Malley is nothing by comparison.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

O'Malley's reach is less than mine. But she is both powerful and free. I wear my power like a corset. I am wrapped so tightly in it I can scarcely move or breathe.

ESSEX

You will dishonor yourself if you see her in this way.

The Queen huffs in frustration.

BURGHLEY

The Queen has made her wishes known.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

And it is your duty to execute those wishes!

(To Burghley)

But, very well... prepare the letters patent. It may suit me to add a mare to my stable of privateers.

Her anger turns to weariness.

BURGHLEY

Are you well, ma'am?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

I am fine, Lord Burghley. I am tired. I sleep poorly.

BURGHLEY

That pains me, ma'am.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Such strange dreams. I saw my own corpse rotting over the Thames.

ESSEX

You, ma'am? A queen hung up to rot like some common pirate? God should not allow it... even in dreams.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

My mother was a queen. Was she not forced to mount a scaffold?

ESSEX

By a king, whose actions were justified.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Justified! She was his wife! He sliced her head from her shoulders because he tired of her... because he lusted after another. All that happened in the waking world, Lord Essex. And you think God worries himself with dreams? But if it eases your mind, know that the dream-corpse was not always me.

ESSEX

Oh, ma'am? Then who?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Grace O'Malley! I was passing by, in hot pursuit of a... a raven. The bird perched on her shoulder and she spake.

ESSEX

The raven?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

The woman! O'Malley.

ESSEX

What said she?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

I heard her not, so I moved closer. When she again opened her mouth... well, it was most unpleasant. A swarm of flies buzzed forth... and then they were not flies, but rather tiny eyes... and tiny ears.

BURGHLEY

Eyes and ears, ma'am?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

When I looked again, the raven had obscured her face. It was busy plucking itself an eyeball. The bird took flight, that gory meal dangling from its beak. Suddenly I saw all through the bird's eyes.

Dudley and The Unborn enter.  
Dudley remains in the shadows.

The Unborn circles Burghley and Essex, ominously flapping his arms like bird wings, distracting the Queen.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

It... it... made a prodigious circle... and... when it veered back past the corpse, I saw my... my... self dangling there, one-eyed and rancid. Then the perspective shifted, and I was watching the bird again. But rather than carrying an eye, it held a gory human bundle... tiny, but... human.

ESSEX

A baby?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Mayhap. I know not. Only that it was... unmistakably human.

The Unborn begins to circle the Queen threateningly. She stares at it, terror barely contained. The men think she is reacting to the memory of the dream. Burghley moves closer. Essex recoils.

BURGHLEY

Ma'am. Pray, cease. Do not distress yourself further.

The Queen moves away from Unborn.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

It is all right, Lord Burghley. There is no more to tell. That is when I woke and found Dudley looming nie.

ESSEX

Dudley? Dead Lord Dudley?

Realizing her slip, Queen glances at Dudley. Burghley and Essex follow her gaze, see nothing.

ESSEX

Do you see him now, ma'am?

The Queen's gaze shifts to Essex.  
Confused and fearful, she is can't  
find words. Lord Burghley covers.

BURGHLEY

Obviously not, Lord Essex. The dream simply shifted.

ESSEX

Nay. She said she woke. I woke and found Dudley looming  
nie. Her words.

BURGHLEY

Have you never had a dream in which you seemed to wake but  
found yourself still dreaming?

Essex stares grimly, unconvinced.

BURGHLEY

Was this, perchance, the morning of Lady O'Malley's  
arrival, your Majesty?

The Queen's expression relaxes.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Yea. It was. How did you know?

BURGHLEY

When I saw you that morning, you mentioned dreaming of Lord  
Dudley, though you made the dream seem less... unsettling.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

It was only a dream. Strange? Aye. But only a dream.

BURGHLEY

I worry you are not sleeping well. Lady Scott will have a  
sleeping draught prepared for you this e'en.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

You may ask and she may hand it over. That does not mean I  
will drink it. Now... God save you. My breakfast grows  
cold.

They bow. She exits.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

(Turning back)

And, pray let me know when I can expect to see Lady O'Malley. Anon, gentlemen. No games. No delays.

Essex and Burghley both give a puppet-like twitch. They bow. After the Queen exits, Burghley calls off stage.

BURGHLEY

Lady Scott, may we see you?

Lady Scott enters.

LADY SCOTT

Yea, my Lords?

BURGHLEY

Has the Queen's sleep been disrupted by dreams of late?

LADY SCOTT

Aye. These past few nights have been tossers.

ESSEX

Does she do more than toss, Lady Scott?

LADY SCOTT

Sir?

ESSEX

Has she spake or called out during her dreams?

LADY SCOTT

I have heard naught of the sort. She simply has been restless.

ESSEX

No mention of Lord Dudley?

LADY SCOTT

Of Eyes?

BURGHLEY

Pray pardon? Eyes?

LADY SCOTT

It is her name for Dudley, sir. Knew you not? Why... I overheard her speaking with Eyes this very morn.

ESSEX

You said she has been only restless.

LADY SCOTT

Aye. When dreaming, but...

BURGHLEY

Many good thanks, Lady Scott. That will do.

He begins to lead her from the room. She shakes him off.

LADY SCOTT

Is it really that strange?

ESSEX

That she converses with the dead? Yea, by God. It is more than strange. I dare say it is terrifying.

BURGHLEY

Lord Essex and I are concerned for the Queen's well being.

LADY SCOTT

Her well being? Methinks it is England you care about. England and naught else.

ESSEX

She is the Queen, Lady Scott. She is England. The two are of a piece. Conjoined.

LADY SCOTT

In most things, mayhap. But always?

ESSEX

Yea, by god.

BURGHLEY

You think it may not be so in this instance?

LADY SCOTT

Yea. Verily.

BURGHLEY

Pray, tell us why.

Lady Scott looks reluctant.

BURGHLEY

You have nothing to fear, Lady Scott. Pray, speak candidly.

LADY SCOTT

She misses Lord Dudley, sirs...

ESSEX

Death stalks us all, Lady Scott. We all miss someone. But we are not like to see them seated in a chair nearby. We ask them not about the weather.

LADY SCOTT

The Queen is not everyone, Lord Essex.

ESSEX

I think that is our point, Lady Scott.

BURGHLEY

Give her room to make her meaning clear, Lord Essex.  
(to Lady Scott)

Pray, go on.

LADY SCOTT

These... episodes... they seem to touch on that small core within the Queen that is but... a woman. England has taken much from her. These days, little reaches that womanly core. But Lord Dudley did. Her love for Dudley was... human. I am unable to speak more clearly.

ESSEX

How has England taken from her? England gives her all. Everything that she is, Lady Scott, is due to England.

LADY SCOTT

And that which she is not, Lord Essex? What of that?

ESSEX

That which she is not? What is this womanly nonsense?

LADY SCOTT

Does she converse with ghosts, Lord Essex? Or does she perchance take private solace in imagining a life that England has denied her?

ESSEX

She is the Queen, Lady Scott. Nothing is denied her. She rejected multiple offers of marriage, not just Dudley's. She lives as she chose to live. And in so choosing... why, she has scaled heights no woman ever hoped to reach.

BURGHLEY

Lives as she chose... Yes, Lady Scott. I think I see your meaning. These are choices no man is asked to make.

LADY SCOTT

Aye, Lord Burghley. You understand.

BURGHLEY

You do the Queen good service.

LADY SCOTT

I wish I could do more, my Lord. The Queen needs friends. And, from time to time, she needs to escape the bonds of being Queen.

BURGHLEY

You may be right. Now... will you excuse us?

Lady Scott bows, turns to exit.

BURGHLEY

And, Lady Scott?

She turns back.

BURGHLEY

I trust you will hold this conversation close?

Lady Scott bows her head again and exits. Essex watches her off and whirls toward Burghley.

ESSEX

Are you putting weight behind the words of this blathering woman, this... glorified chambermaid? What is all this talk of friends and domestic life? She is the Queen!

LORD BURGHLEY

The Queen struggles with something... acutely. She is... wrestling with something. This obsession with O'Malley. Her dream. Her conversations with Dudley.

ESSEX

So you share my concerns?

BURGHLEY

Have you voiced any? I hear naught but shrill exclamations.

ESSEX

She sees Dudley! Talks to him! And the way she spake of that dream. Have you ever known her to drop her guard so? And this irrational desire to give all to this... this... pirate!

BURGHLEY

She hardly gives all. O'Malley's ships would be but small help against Spain. They would hardly be decisive.

ESSEX

Still... to ask nothing of O'Malley? This Queen gives not a compliment yet she gets two in return. Something is rotten, Lord Burghley. She is not in her right mind.

BURGHLEY

I do not question her sanity, but the meaning of all this...

He gestures: "I know not."

BURGHLEY

It all seems connected... O'Malley, the dream, Dudley. Perhaps seeing O'Malley will help.

ESSEX

She cannot see O'Malley. No one who communes with ghosts can be trusted to represent England.

BURGHLEY

I am afraid that choice lies not with you, Lord Essex. The Queen's instructions were clear.

He extends a hand, inviting Essex to exit ahead of him.

BURGHLEY

Perchance you would join me for breakfast and then... what say you... shall we invite a pirate to court?

ESSEX

We have an obligation, sir. Not to the Queen, but to the Crown. To England.

BURGHLEY

Aye.

ESSEX

She is harming England!

Burghley studies Essex, who knows he's gone too far.

BURGHLEY

I have known this Queen since I was young. Since before she even thought of being queen. I counseled her through the choices to which Lady Scott made reference. I saw the toll those choices took. She loved Dudley... and she rejected him, for England. I may not understand all she feels in this moment, but she has earned my trust.

ESSEX

And if you are wrong? If she is does lasting damage? This is why women are unfit to rule, Lord Burghley. They are weak minded and weaker willed.

BURGHLEY

After fifty years and four monarchs, I have come to doubt whether anyone, man or woman, is truly fit to rule. Or is ever left fit by ruling. This Queen has done well. Despite youthful trauma. Despite the chaos she inherited as a young Queen. Despite double-dealers who make public displays of devotion while spewing private poison. Some called her illegitimate; others, a heretic. All of them dismissed her as a woman.

BURGHLEY (CONT.)

Through it all, her hand has been steady on the tiller, and England has sailed true. It has been many years since I doubted her, Lord Essex. With O'Malley... when the time comes... she will remember who she is.

ESSEX

Serving a woman has unmanned you more than I imagined. If you are wrong, you will pay dearly. I shall see to it.

BURGHLEY

The weight of responsibility justly borne does not frighten me, sirrah. Does it frighten you?

ESSEX

Stand down, old gaffer.

They study each other, Essex menacingly, Burghley calmly. Burghley extends an arm.

BURGHLEY

After you, Lord Essex. Grace O'Malley awaits.

They exit.

CURTAIN

END OF ACT

INTERMISSION

## ACT II

## SCENE 1

*Greenwich Palace. Three rooms surround the Presence Chamber, which is located at center stage. Two waiting rooms sit adjacent to the Presence Chamber, while a third room sits upstage and several feet above stage level, as if at some distance from the other rooms. It is empty. The lights come up dimly in all four areas, enough to make movements visible. In the Presence Chamber, Burghley is supervising stagehands, who prepare for the day's audiences. Grace and MacNally are in one waiting room. Grace sits tensely while MacNally explores with trademark enthusiasm. The Queen sits in the other waiting room with Dudley and The Unborn, who play chess. Lights up on the Queen's room.*

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Can you feel it, Eyes? Can you?

Dudley glances at her.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

This palace is ready to burst... like an overripe melon. It throbs with a palpable anticipation that I have not felt since... God!... since they made me Queen. The men were undone then, as well. There was treason in the air. I felt it then, and... by God, I feel it now. The great wheel has come full circle.

She sits back, contented, smiling. However, her look sours as The Unborn checkmates Dudley and struts triumphantly.

Lights up on Grace's room, where  
MacNally is examining a pamphlet.

GRACE

Pray sit, MacNally.

MACNALLY

(Waving the pamphlet)

It is on court etiquette. Come. Let us practice.

GRACE

Sit down!

MACNALLY

You should not go blindly into an audience with the Queen.

He opens the pamphlet, studies it.  
The lights come up slowly on the  
empty room. Essex enters. Bingham  
follows. Essex sits at the desk,  
writes. Bingham peers over Essex's  
shoulder. As Essex finishes a  
page, he hands it back to Bingham,  
who narrates.

BINGHAM

To the Honorable Sir Richard Bingham, most honorable  
Governor of the County of Mayo in Her Gracious Royal  
Majesty's Colony of Ireland. My dearest and most noble Sir  
Richard...

Bingham preens as Essex writes.

BINGHAM

My love for England is deep and abiding, but, alas, my  
fears for England's future are grave.

Bingham's look darkens.

BINGHAM

The pirate has cast her foul spell and seems poised to  
secure all from our glorious but womanly sovereign.  
Burghley is a bootless knave.

I trust that my meaning is clear, good Sir Richard, when I say that the heavy burden, as so often happens in troubled times, falls to those with suitable strength of will. To the soldiers, Sir Richard. To the men. To us.

Essex continues to write. In her waiting room the Queen gestures toward The Unborn.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

This... companion of yours, Robert... pray tell, is it a boy or a girl?

Dudley shrugs.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Undetermined?

Dudley nods. The Queen looks uncomfortably at The Unborn. Essex rises. He and Bingham exit. The lights dim in their room. In Grace's room, MacNally looks up eagerly, reading in a halting, unpracticed monotone.

MACNALLY

Listen to this... Whence one is in-invited to ap- ap-proach the Her Gra... Gray...see-us Ma..

GRACE

Gracious Majesty.

MACNALLY

Gracious Majesty... one should do so with utmost def... def...

GRACE

Deference? Impressive, MacNally. You are beginning to read well.

MacNally smiles, proud to be complimented by Grace.

MACNALLY

Def-er-ence. Kneel before her Grace, eyes lowered, head bowed. Hear that Grace? You have to kneel.

Grace rolls her eyes, affection for MacNally apparent despite her nerves and her disgust with the formality of court. Lights up on the Presence Chamber as Essex enters. A portrait of the Queen hangs crookedly.

ESSEX

Come now. The Queen is skewwhiff.

The stage hands look confused.

ESSEX

Skewwhiff!

BURGHLEY

He means she is askew...

(Looking at Essex)

In a figurative sense, no doubt?

Essex ignores Burghley, huffs in frustration. The stagehands, continue to stare, perplexed.

ESSEX

Oh, God's teeth!

He walks to portrait, straightens it, takes a final look around.

ESSEX

I think we are ready... You tell the pirate. I will fetch her Majesty.

Essex, Burghley, stagehands exit. Lights dim in Presence Chamber. In her waiting room, the Queen looks fearfully at The Unborn.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

We never, Robert... I mean, we were... chaste. But... is it... Would it... Would it have been ours, Robert?

Dudley nods. Queen's hand goes to her face. Her breathing quickens.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

The dream? That... that... gory bundle. Was it...?

Her voice trails off. Dudley stares. The Queen grows agitated. Dudley is impassive. In the other waiting room, Conroy reads aloud from the booklet.

MACNALLY

Are you listening, Grace? There is more.

(He reads, still haltingly)

'Tis entirely un-ac-ac-ceptable to make... eye contact with the Queen. One should not lift one's eyes until addressed... addressed. And once dis-missed, one must back from the room. One must never turns one's back on... on... Her Royal Majesty.

GRACE

How do I to trust her if I cannot look her in eye?

MACNALLY

Why would you want to trust her?

MacNally bends over the booklet. Conroy enters, notices Grace staring grimly.

CONROY

Am I interrupting?

He smiles, trying to break the tension.

CONROY

You should see the privies. There are no buckets, like back home. Holes in the floor with long chutes that lead outside. Must be drafty in winter.

He smiles again. MacNally and Grace seem disinterested. Conroy walks to MacNally and looks at the pamphlet.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

It matters little, Robert. Boy or girl... It matters little... The situation was... impossible... Marriage would have ruined us. It would have spoiled everything. No one thought you fit to be the King. And I still carried a whiff of illegitimacy... my father's fetid legacy. The scandal. The jockeying. None of us would have been safe.

(Looking at The Unborn)

Least of all an heir.

Conroy looks up from the booklet.

CONROY

These rules are exceedingly specific, Grace. You would be well advised to practice.

He walks a few paces away.

CONROY

Approach me as if I were the Queen.

GRACE

Cease will all with this... nonsense. I need to think. All this is mere distraction.

She rises, moves away.

CONROY

You will have to play their games, Grace... by their rules. A good impression may be all that stands between us and the noose.

GRACE

Let me be. The Queen will not ask me perform like some silly jester... or some mindless puppet. Even if she did, I will not grovel.

Grace turns away, looking tense.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

I daresay I would have hated being that Queen... your queen. My dissatisfaction would have poisoned us. Would that have suited you, Eyes? To see me broken me like some obstinate mare?

Dudley looks over. The Queen rises, moves away.

CONROY

Go ahead, MacNally. Grace can watch you do it.

MacNally grins, curtsseys, kneels.

MACNALLY

Your... your... worship.

CONROY

No. It says here to call her "Your Majesty" or "Your Grace" the first time and then "ma'am."

QUEEN ELIZABETH

'Tis better this way...

Essex knocks at her door. The Queen doesn't react.

MACNALLY

What think you, Grace?

He turns, bends, thrusting his ass in Conroy's direction.

MACNALLY

Can I waggle my ass at her?

Burghley enters Grace's room. Essex pushes the Queen's door partway open.

ESSEX

Your Majesty? 'Tis time.

The Queen is still lost in thought and doesn't react. Burghley notices the booklet and chuckles.

BURGHLEY

'Tis a fine ass, lad, but nay... I beg you... do not waggle it at the Queen.

(Aside)

God-a-mercy!

Essex enters the Queen's room cautiously, bows.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Am I not right, Robert? 'Tis better?

Hearing this and realizing who she's talking to, Essex looks up.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

'Tis better that it never lived.

The Unborn rushes the Queen, outraged. The Queen throws her hands up fearfully. Dudley watches emotionlessly.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Oh... Oh... Oh, god. Away. Away!

The Queen looks to Dudley for help; gets none. All Essex sees is the Queen cowering and raving. The Unborn stops inches from the Queen, chest heaving. A deep sadness replaces its rage. It emits a heart-wrenching wail.

ESSEX

Your Majesty...

The Queen looks from The Unborn to the stone-faced Dudley, a rapid cascade of emotions crossing her face: fear, confusion, anger, sadness...

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Robert?... You? What is this?

Essex recoils slightly, looks from the Queen to the seemingly empty spot in the room she is addressing.

DUDLEY

Not me... Never me.

The Queen looks at The Unborn, emits an anguished cry and backs toward Essex. The Unborn follows.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Stay away!

As the Unborn closes in again, she faints. Essex catches her.

ESSEX

Your Majesty!

Essex lays the unconscious Queen gently on the floor. Dudley and The Unborn loom over her for a moment before Dudley seizes The Unborn, whose cry is animalistic as Dudley pulls it off. Essex looks around in panic.

ESSEX

Help me! Someone! The Queen needs help!

In the other waiting room, they hear Essex. Burghley shuffles toward the door.

GRACE

(To Conroy and MacNally)

Remain here.

She follows Burghley, arriving in the other room before him. Essex is on his knees next to the Queen. The lights dim in the room that Grace and Burghley just left. MacNally and Conroy exit.

ESSEX  
(To Grace)

Help me.

Burghley enters as Grace and Essex  
lift the Queen. He stares in  
shock, but then takes charge.

BURGHLEY  
This way. Make haste.

He lets Essex and Grace pass as  
they carry the Queen off.

BURGHLEY  
Make haste!

Burghley exits after them.

BLACKOUT

END OF SCENE

## ACT II

## SCENE 2

*Greenwich Palace. The Queen's  
bedchamber. Moment's later.*

LADY SCOTT (OFFSTAGE)

Oh! Oh! What has happened?

BURGHLEY (OFFSTAGE)

Summon the doctor, Lady Scott. Waste not a second.

Essex and Grace enter carrying the Queen. Lord Burghley enters. Essex and Grace lay the Queen on her bed. They all stare, unsure what to do. The Queen stirs. Their relief is obvious. The Queen glances around, disoriented.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

What has happened?

ESSEX

You fainted, ma'am.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

(To Grace)

Who, pray tell, are you?

GRACE

(Curtseying)

I am Grace O'Malley, Your Majesty.

The Queen nods wearily.

BURGHLEY

We have summoned the doctor, ma'am.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

I do not need a doctor.

ESSEX

But, ma'am...

QUEEN ELIZABETH

I do not need a doctor. I had a shock. That is all.

ESSEX

I was there ma'am. It is not clear what... you...

QUEEN ELIZABETH

I had a shock, Lord Essex.

Lady Scott enters.

LADY SCOTT

The doctor is coming.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

I do not wish to see a doctor!

Lady Scott puts hand to mouth.

LADY SCOTT

Oh!... Oh!... You are... alive!

She hugs the Queen.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

God's blood, woman!

Lady Scott steps away.

LADY SCOTT

Beg pardon, Ma'am.

She looks at the Queen, grows emotional, hugs her again.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Get off you feckless harpy.

Burghley gently pulls Lady Scott away.

BURGHLEY

Ma'am, it would be wise to let the doctor examine you.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Nay!

BURGHLEY

It may be naught, but nonetheless...

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Oh, fie! I can start a war with a word, but I cannot control this small piece of my own life. No doctor...

(Indicating Grace)

Only her. The rest of you may go.

ESSEX

Your Majesty, I pray thee! This is too much.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Too much!

The Queen struggles to rise from the bed.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Too much!

She swings her legs off and pushes herself upright, facing Essex with wrath in her eyes. He is cowed but stands stoically.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

How dare you, Lord Essex? You... who first came before me as an infant screaming for his mother's teat? Now, as a man... and you are barely a man... you beg this favor, or demand that privilege. You suckle England dry!... Too much.

BURGHLEY

Please, ma'am. Calm yourself. The doctor...

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Curse the doctor!

(To Lady Scott)

Send that blood-thirsty ghoul away!

Lady Scott hesitates.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Away!

Lady Scott bows and exits.

BURGHLEY

Please ma'am. It is in everyone's best interest...

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Ah ha! There it is. There it is, Lord Burghley. Is that not the crux of the matter?

(To Grace)

I have spent a lifetime worrying about everyone's best interests, Lady O'Malley. Forsooth. This one's best interests. That one's best interests. England's best interests. By my faith, I have done it... dutifully... with love for England in my lonely heart... but always... always!... at the behest of grasping men who have not the faintest understanding of my best interests.

BURGHLEY

Perchance we could speak in private, ma'am?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

(Sarcastically)

By all means, Lord Burghley. Let us speak in private.

BURGHLEY

Lord Essex... pray escort Lady O'Malley out... allow me a moment with the Queen.

Essex delays, suspicious.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Oh, go to, Essex. But do not let Lady O'Malley stray.

Grace and Essex exit. Burghley watches them off, turns to Queen.

BURGHLEY

Your Majesty, Pray pinch me.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Pinch you?

BURGHLEY

Aye. And then, by your leave, I shall pinch you back.

He gestures to indicate the general scene around them.

BURGHLEY

There is a strangeness in all of this. It would seem that one of us is dreaming.

The Queen snorts. Burghley smiles weakly.

BURGHLEY

Pray tell me what ails you, ma'am.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

What ails me? Am I not exercising my sovereign right to choose, from time to time, what happens in this... this... airless hole. Would you deny me that right?

BURGHLEY

Nay, ma'am. Ne'er. But, grant me leave to help. Tell me what you need so I might... help.

Her look and voice soften.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

My thanks, Lord Burghley, but I have demons to exorcise... and that is one of the few tasks for which I fear you are not fit. I vouchsafe that O'Malley is the only one equipped to do the deed.

Burghley looks uncomfortable and does not respond for a long moment. He paces, avoiding eye contact with the Queen. At last he looks her in the eye and nods.

BURGHLEY

Very well. I will summon her back. Though it troubles me mightily, I will summon her.

The Queen's eyes fill with tears.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

You are my spirit, Lord Burghley. Do you know that? My spirit...

Her voice trails off. Burghley clears his throat uncomfortably.

BURGHLEY

I pray you, ma'am, remember who you are.

He bows and walks to door, speaks  
through it.

BURGHLEY

Lady O'Malley, the Queen wishes to see you.

ESSEX (OFFSTAGE)

God's wounds! This is outrageous!

Grace enters.

ESSEX (OFFSTAGE)

It is an... an... outrage!

Burghley exits.

BURGHLEY

(Moving off stage)

Things that are outrageous often are an outrage, Lord  
Essex.

Door closes. Long pause as the  
Queen and Grace assess each other.  
The Queen looks drained.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Here we are. At last.

GRACE

Aye, Are you all right, Your Majesty?

The Queen waves dismissively.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

What think you of Lord Too Much and my Duke of Best  
Interests?

GRACE

They seem... harmless enough.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Harmless! Ha! They are not harmless.

GRACE

Lord Essex is inconsequential. Inexperienced.  
Undisciplined. Predictable. Lord Burghley bears watching.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Oh, Burghley is tame enough... if he is on your side.  
Essex, though... I fear I will have to put Essex down some  
day.

GRACE

Then why keep him?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

His sword, Lady O'Malley. I will keep his sword as long as  
it is useful. Besides... he cuts a fine figure.

Grace examines the room. The Queen  
watches her.

GRACE

Is that why I am here, ma'am... my sword?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

You asked to come.

GRACE

But why did you agree?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Is it really that mysterious? Two women in a game so choked  
with men? I wish to know you.

Grace nods slowly.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

You seem undone, Lady O'Malley.  
(Gesturing at the room.)  
This is not what you expected?

GRACE

In troth... nay.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

It is extraordinary. I will grant you that. But, so are we,  
Lady O'Malley!

And consider the alternative: A court audience. All the shuffling and bowing and kneeling. Now, we can truly get acquainted.

GRACE

I have specific reasons for coming hither, ma'am.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Yea. I know. Sons and ships. We shall get to all that. But first... Here we are! Alone. At last.

GRACE

Mmm. So you said.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Are you not the least bit curious?

GRACE

Curious, ma'am?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Aye! Curious! We are oddities, Lady O'Malley. Rare birds. To talk only business... sons and ships... 'Twould be like sprouting wings and choosing stubbornly to walk.

GRACE

What would you like to know, ma'am?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Pray, stop calling me ma'am!

GRACE

I crave your pardon. Your Majesty.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

God's eyes, nay! Call me Elizabeth.

Grace makes s gesture of assent.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Good now! With formalities bobbing in our wake, let us discuss your son.

GRACE

My son?... I... I thought...

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Was he, in troth, born while you battled Algerian pirates?

GRACE

This is foolishness. My son is held... unjustifiably... by an English Governor whom you appointed. Let us discuss that.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Unjustifiably? Has he not participated in rebellions. Did he not violate the law?

GRACE

Your law. He fought invaders.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

So he is either a criminal or a prisoner of war. Either way, we are justified in holding him.

GRACE

So you intend to deny me?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Deny you? I am poised to strip my soul naked for you. Do not treat this like some base transaction to be concluded with maximum haste. Savor the moment, Lady O'Malley.

Grace stares. The Queen sighs,  
moves away, back to Grace.

GRACE

The Algerians came a day or two later.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

(Gleefully)

Aha! But they came. Verily... they came. And you fought them. A babe on your hip and sword in your hand. My God!... I envy your freedom, Lady O'Malley. To point your bow toward the horizon and leave the fetid swamp behind. Open water, no land in sight... It must be exhilarating!

GRACE

Sometimes. Also terrifying.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Terrifying! Terrifying would be fine. Anything but four walls and politics as usual, Lady O'Malley.

GRACE

Grace.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Pray pardon?

GRACE

You asked me to call you Elizabeth. Pray call me Grace.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

I have ne'er left the south of England, Grace.

GRACE

In troth?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Aye... I live my life in little rooms... knocking heads with men who wish the rooms were smaller still. What I would not give to feel the wind in my hair and the swells beneath my feet. To see Africa! Or the New World! To have everyone of import assembled on a storm-tossed strip of deck, a tiny bobbing cork of humanity on the vast and empty ocean. The clarity of it all. Shared purpose and shared peril.

GRACE

Shared everything. Trust me.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

I am beginning to, Grace. I am most assuredly beginning to trust you. But, God's blood, how do you get all those men to follow you?

GRACE

You are as qualified to answer that question as I will ever be.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Oh... I am fortune's favored. I was born royal. What choice have the men who serve me? You earned your station.

GRACE

We both have earned respect.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Yea. Mayhap we have. And now... here we are. Two strong women. Living out loud on the world's grandest stage!

GRACE

Rare birds.

The Queen smiles. She gives a lighthearted cluck, like a chicken, which causes Grace to smile. Grace is growing more comfortable.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

We differ in one way.

GRACE

Just one?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

You are a wife and a mother.

GRACE

I am a widow. Twice over. I watched my oldest son die at the hands of the same governor who now threatens my youngest. Your governor. If husbands and children make us different, you are quickly erasing those differences.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

I erase nothing. It matters little whether they now live.

GRACE

By my faith... that is spoken like a woman with neither husband nor children!

Dudley and The Unborn enter. Drifting in the shadows. The Queen tries to ignore them. She's searching, in frustration, for words to make Grace understand.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Pray, be not angry. I speak not of family. I daresay I know about losing family. My meaning is more subtle. Their deaths are to be mourned, aye... But, that they lived at all and, in living, took nothing from you... left you whole and strong, and... free. That is the heart of the matter. There is nothing to be mourned in that!

She is overcome briefly by emotion, takes a few slow breathes. Then she raises her hands in conciliation, palms out.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

At least not for your part. For mine... well... I fear your story leaves me with much to mourn.

GRACE

(To herself, frustrated)

Conroy had it right. I should have stayed away.

(To the Queen)

We have real business to discuss, but you waste time with lurid gossip and hypothetical musings on the nature of power and freedom?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Nay! Nothing we discuss is hypothetical. We made choices. I... made choices.

Dudley and The Unborn move out of the shadows and begin to circle Grace and the Queen slowly. The Queen fights a losing battle to focus her attention on Grace.

GRACE

We all make choices. Choose and move on. The past is set.

Grace pauses, puzzled by the Queen's distraction, angered.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

But I... I look at you... and... I fear... I fear that I chose poorly... I rue that I chose poorly...

The Queen's voice trails off, eyes on Dudley and The Unborn, who have stopped circling and look steadily at the Queen. Grace follows her gaze but sees nothing.

GRACE

There is no gain to be won from regrets. We make the best choices we can, and then we learn and move forward.

The Queen makes no response, absorbed by the presence of Dudley and The Unborn. In the silence, Grace's look shifts from the Queen to the seemingly empty spot in the room where she is gazing. At last, Grace's anger boils over.

GRACE

What see you?

(Emphasize "me")

Look at me.

(Emphasize "here")

I am here.

(Emphasize "look")

Look at me!

Grace's tone shocks the Queen from her trance. She looks at Grace.

GRACE

What is it?! What see you?!

The Queen's gaze shifts back to Dudley and The Unborn, who have moved very close; they are nearly on top of her, gaze steadily at her. The Queen gazes back, calmly now. No more fear.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Regrets... I see the flotsam of an inexperienced Queen...

She reaches out to stroke The Unborn's cheek. The Unborn flinches, but then relaxes.

The Queen takes The Unborn's face  
in both hands, like a blind woman  
learning the features of a friend.  
Grace's anger flares.

GRACE

Regrets and flotsam? Nay! Answer precisely. What? Do? You?  
See?

The insistent tone in Grace's  
voice yanks the Queen back into  
the moment. She takes her hands  
from The Unborn's face, turns a  
tender look on Dudley.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

I see Dudley, the love I cast to the wind.

(To the Unborn)

And I see a child... a child who might have been... but for  
me.

The Queen steps away from The  
Unborn, turns to face Grace. There  
are tears in her eyes and on her  
cheeks.

GRACE

But for you? Why is the fault yours?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

I chose selfishly. I chose...

(Gesturing around them)

All this...

GRACE

The throne? You were in the line of succession. Where was  
the choice?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

I could have shared the throne with Dudley. I could have  
borne him... an heir.

GRACE

But you did not. Tell me why.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

I have witnessed what women reap from marriage and motherhood. My mother. My sister. I feared irrelevance. But you... you broke that mold. And here I sit... wondering what might have been.

GRACE

You chastise yourself for disobedience when obedience might have cost you all?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

I was selfish.

GRACE

You were disruptive! You chose to defy the long-standing expectations of men.

She gestures toward the general area where the Queen interacted with Dudley and The Unborn.

GRACE

They are your rebellion, ma'am. What use has the world for another compliant queen? One more dutiful daughter? More brood-mare wives? The world is choked with those. You dared to blaze a different path. One that the feet of future generations will beat wide and smooth.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Talk not of future generations. There is no heir to carry on the Tudor name. My impression will be faint.

GRACE

Your legacy is yours to shape. How many women can say as much? You have not borne an heir. What of it? May you not name one?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

I am under great pressure to do that very thing.

GRACE

Name a woman! Make us all Tudors. We will carry forth this holy and unruly cause, spurred on by your example. We will stamp your impression so deep that none shall dare forget. It will take time to cleanse this man-stained world... a generation, two perchance? But mark my words...

one day not far hence... will see the dawning of a golden age for women.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Name a woman? My regrets need no compounding. Essex would pounce! I would sentence England to a generation of civil war.

GRACE

If war be the cost, then let it come.

She gestures again to the space  
Dudley and Unborn seem to occupy.

GRACE

Your regret demeans them. It demeans their sacrifice... and yours. Revere them. Mourn them. But do not regret them. Be grateful... and then be done with them... You are stronger than you think.

The Queen averts her gaze, wipes her eyes, embarrassed and moved by the personal turn their exchange has taken. She clears her throat.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Well... this is not at all what I expected. It has been a... different sort of extraordinary. But now, I fear I need to rest. Pray, take your leave.

Grace hesitates, nods, moves to exit.

GRACE

(Turning back)

If I may... there remains the business of my son and ships.

The Queen sighs, presses her fingers hard into her eyes, weariness deepening.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

I have no energy for such matters now. Sup with me later. You and your men. We shall address all... you have my word.

GRACE

Very well. I leave you to your rest.

Grace bows again, exits. The Queen stares into the distance, does not watch her off. Her gaze shifts to Dudley and The Unborn, who stare steadily back. The lights fade slowly.

BLACKOUT

END OF SCENE

ACT II

SCENE 3

*Greenwich, England. Grace's ship. Conroy and MacNally wait tensely. Grace enters.*

CONROY &amp; MACNALLY

Grace!

CONROY

We were growing concerned.

MACNALLY

What happened?

GRACE

I just left the Queen.

MACNALLY

You have been talking all this time?

CONROY

What happened?

GRACE

Go slow. One at a time, I pray you.

(to Conroy)

I hesitate to describe what happened. It was odd.

MACNALLY

Did you get what you came for?

GRACE

'Tis not yet settled. The Queen asks us to dine with her this e'en.

CONROY

Us?

GRACE

All of us.

MacNally lets out an excited whoop and begins to prance about.

MACNALLY

(Affected accent)

I say, Conroy... my good man... are you ready to dine like a royal? How do you take your squab?

Conroy smiles, fueling MacNally's antics. Grace looks serious.

GRACE

Enough.

MacNally lifts a hand, pinky finger extended. His face takes on a pinched look and he thrusts his ass toward the door. Burghley enters, clears his throat.

BURGHLEY

My, but you do like to throw that ass about. You look like a French whore with hemorrhoids, my good lad.

A snort of laughter escapes Conroy. MacNally straightens up, grinning. He glances at Grace, whose look says: "Behave."

GRACE

How now, Lord Burghley. Who knew you were so well versed in the complaints of des putains Francaises?

BURGHLEY

Mais oui, Madame O'Malley. It is my Cambridge education on full display. I trust you had a satisfactory conversation with the Queen?

GRACE

You spoke with her?

BURGHLEY

Nay. She wished to rest. But I understand you will be joining us for supper.

(Glancing at the men)

All of you.

GRACE

Aye. I just shared the news. MacNally was expressing his excitement.

BURGHLEY

Ah. Yea. Well...

Burghley seems uncomfortable. He clears his throat nervously.

BURGHLEY

Do you have questions about anything you discussed with her Majesty?

GRACE

Nay. It was a pleasant chat.

BURGHLEY

I see. No concerns at all?

GRACE

Are you casting blindly, Lord Burghley? It does not become you.

BURGHLEY

I just want everything to go smoothly this evening... for Tibbott's sake.

GRACE

I am sure the Queen will share whatever details she deems appropriate.

BURGHLEY

No doubt, but I remain interested in your perspective.

GRACE

We discussed girlish things, Lord Burghley. Naught that would interest you.

BURGHLEY

I think you would be surprised by my interests, Lady O'Malley.

GRACE

Very little surprises me, Lord Burghley. I suspect you have an interest in exchanging something for Tibbott's freedom... and you wonder what promises the Queen may have made while alone with me?

Burghley looks uneasy.

GRACE

Put your mind at ease, sir. The topic was never broached.

BURGHLEY

I see. Very well... Good day, then. I will see you anon.

He turns to exit. Stops.

BURGHLEY

Did the Queen seem to be recovered from her fright, Lady O'Malley? Did she seem... herself?

GRACE

Herself? You know her far better than I, my Lord. She seemed tired. Distracted.

BURGHLEY

Aye. She has much on her mind... The episode earlier today... It was... troubling.

GRACE

Agreed.

BURGHLEY

And you are sure there is nothing else you can share about the Queen's state of mind?

GRACE

I crave your pardon, Lord Burghley. Would that I could be more helpful.

BURGHLEY

Mmmm. Very well... My Lady. Good sirs.

Burghley nods and exits.

CONROY

What, pray tell, was that?

GRACE

That was something quite rare, gentlemen. The great Lord Burghley at a disadvantage.

CONROY

He seemed almost panicked. What did you and the Queen discuss?

GRACE

It is not our conversation that worries Burghley.

MACNALLY

He asked about her state of mind.

CONROY

Is she not right?

GRACE

She is troubled. Has visions.

CONROY

What?

MACNALLY

Ghosts?

GRACE

Ghosts. Visions. I know not what they are. By the end of our conversation, she no longer hid her affliction.

CONROY

My god. This is...

Conroy and MacNally speak simultaneously again.

CONROY

A disaster.

MACNALLY

An opportunity.

MacNally realizes what Conroy said and looks at him in shock.

MACNALLY

A disaster?... Is there something you two are not telling me? What are you playing at?

GRACE

Naught. Conroy is merely expressing concern for the Queen...

(Irritated glance at Conroy)

Displaying his robust male empathy.

MACNALLY

Do not lie to me. What is this about?... Did you join forces with the Queen?

CONROY

Enough, MacNally.

GRACE

I have done naught.

MACNALLY

But you may? You are thinking about it? Tibbott and the ships are just a... a... ploy?

GRACE

Nay! I will get my son and my ships back.

MACNALLY

Even if it means betraying your people?

CONROY

MacNally!

GRACE

He has a right to know.

(To MacNally)

I will do what it takes to protect my family... and my crew.

MACNALLY

She sees ghosts! You said so yourself. You would turn traitor for a... a... mad woman?

GRACE

Calm yourself, son.

MACNALLY

I am not your son.

GRACE

But you are. In every way that matters. I took you in after you lost your family to Bingham. I gave you a place in my crew. I gave you a life. I have grown fond of you, MacNally. You are like a son, in every way that matters.

MacNally scowls, stalks away.  
Grace changes tactics.

GRACE

The Queen is troubled. I cannot say, in troth, whether she is mad.

MACNALLY

She is English. That is all that matters.

GRACE

We will all be English soon enough! English, or dead. The choice is ours to make.

MacNally stares, horrified.

MACNALLY

You are the mad one.

MacNally turns and stalks for the door. Grace is tense, hand on her sword. Conroy reaches for him, but MacNally shrugs him off.

CONROY

Open your eyes. She is right. What chance do the clans have against the unified force of England. We cannot win.

MacNally roars, draws his sword.  
Grace is faster, stops him short,  
tip of her sword at his throat.

GRACE

That is enough.

MACNALLY

Go ahead, Grace. Kill me. Is that not what your sons risk when they are disobedient? Aren't we all just chess pieces that you shift around your board... sacrificed as needed?

Grace lets her sword drop.

GRACE

I do not know what is going to happen, MacNally. It has been an odd day. Odd enough that I am no longer sure whether an alliance makes sense.

MACNALLY

It never did.

GRACE

If England is unified, we cannot beat them. But what I saw today... If the Queen is losing her grip on reality, mayhap the loyalty of those around her also slips. Essex is a threat. That much is clear. I will take whatever action is in our best interests, but right now, I know not what that may be.

MACNALLY

There is only one choice.

CONROY

Enough, MacNally.

He moves toward MacNally. Grace puts a calming hand on his arm.

GRACE

You are young, MacNally. Some day you will see that there is never just one choice. You talk about betraying Irishmen. What is it when we plunder Galway... or sack Cork.

MACNALLY

That is different.

GRACE

How? You have made more Irish orphans than English ones.

MACNALLY

They are Irish, but...

GRACE

But what?... They are from other clans? Other counties?...  
Do you not see, MacNally? Our factions will be our undoing.  
Against a larger army answering to one queen... to this  
queen... bickering clans do not stand a chance.

Grace and Conroy look somberly at  
MacNally, who looks grim.

GRACE

I do not know what will happen tonight, but I need a  
promise from you both.

She looks at each of them in turn.

GRACE

No one does anything rash. Agreed?

CONROY

Agreed.

GRACE

(To MacNally)

Agreed?

MACNALLY

(Tense)

Aye.

Grace leads them off stage.

GRACE

Good. To the palace for dinner...

(To MacNally)

You have an ass to waggle at the Queen, my boy.

She smiles, but MacNally pulls  
away, looking sullen.

MACNALLY

You go ahead. I'll be right behind.

Grace and Conroy study him then  
exit, Grace casting a final,  
somber glance over her shoulder.

MacNally watches them off, walks to a nearby chest and removes a dagger. He examines it, tucks it into his boot, exits. Lights dim.

BLACKOUT

END OF SCENE

## ACT II

## SCENE 4

*Greenwich Palace. A dining room.*

*Queen Elizabeth enters with Grace. The Queen's hand rests familiarly, almost affectionately, on Grace's elbow. Grace walks stiffly, uncomfortably, beside her. Lord Burghley and Lord Essex follow. Burghley looks stoic and cool, but alert, like a snake hidden from view and ready to strike. Essex is wound tight, jumpy, like a rodent in the open. A sword hangs at Essex's hip. He is the only one of them who is visibly armed. Last to enter are Conroy and MacNally. Conroy looks around with interest. MacNally's face is grim.*

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Lady O'Malley, I have not felt this refreshed in years. Your visit has done me a world of good.

GRACE

I am glad, your Majesty, but I am also surprised. That is not how I expected you to feel.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

I have decided to embrace your advice, Lady O'Malley. No regrets.

*Burghley takes note of these words as Dudley and The Unborn enter and flank the Queen. She ignores them.*

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Eyes forward to greet the beckoning future.

BURGHLEY

That is interesting advice, Your Majesty.

(To Grace)

You do not believe the past has anything to teach us?

Dudley and the Unborn circle the Queen, drawing closer with each revolution. She ignores them.

GRACE

Of course it does, Lord Burghley. And like any good teacher, the past repeats itself until we can apply its lessons in shaping a better future.

ESSEX

(Raising his glass)

Ah! To the future, my good and venerable gentles! A heartfelt toast, from my generation to yours.

BURGHLEY

Essex!

QUEEN ELIZABETH

(To Essex, sternly)

Spoken like someone who takes a short view of the future.

(To Grace)

Lord Essex worries that I have lost my head.

(Sideways glance at Essex)

But it is his that needs minding.

Essex bows his head but his deference is insincere.

ESSEX

I crave your pardon, ma'am. I am a soldier. It is a profession that can be cruel to anyone with long horizons.

The Queen and Burghley study Essex. Dudley and The Unborn lurk threateningly near the Queen. Conroy and MacNally watch with a combination of voyeuristic interest and discomfort. Grace redirects the conversation.

GRACE

I would be interested to hear how the lessons of the past might prompt you to shape the near future ma'am.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Oh? Particularly as it pertains to the future of a certain son and some ships, mayhap?

Grace bows her head. The Queen turns to Burghley.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Do you have the letter?

BURGHLEY

I have both letters, ma'am.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

One at a time, Lord Burghley. The Bingham letter first.

Burghley takes a letter from his cloak, passes it to Queen, who turns to Grace. As the Queen's focus turns to business, Dudley and The Unborn move into shadows and then exit.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

This is a letter addressed to Governor Bingham. It is in my hand and under my seal. It orders the release of your son Tibbott and the return of your confiscated ships.

(Handing it to Grace)

I thought you might like to deliver it personally.

GRACE

Many good thanks, ma'am. I will enjoy that.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Aye. Methinks you will.

The Queen grows inexplicably nervous, pauses awkwardly.

BURGHLEY

The letters patent, ma'am?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Nay. My thinking on that matter has shifted.

BURGHLEY

Shifted, ma'am? This is unorthodox...

ESSEX

What are you playing at?

The Queen glare at Essex.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Ma'am, Lord Essex. What are you playing at, Ma'am. It is customary to address me so. Sometimes the veneer of respect is all we have.

Essex stares back, still contemptuous for a second or two. Then, he relents, bows his head.

ESSEX

Ma'am.

Burghley glances from Essex to the Queen and then to Grace and her men, who watch in some confusion.

MACNALLY

(Aside to Conroy)

What is happening?

Grace waves at him to be quiet, her attention fixed on the Queen.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

A good question, lad. I daresay we are about to shake things up in Ireland.

(To Grace)

The letters patent to which Lord Burghley refers were intended as a surprise gesture of good will, something to demonstrate my good intentions.

GRACE

(Warily)

Ma'am.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

They would grant you privateer status.

GRACE

I see. But your thinking has changed?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

It has. I would like to do more.

BURGHLEY

(Urgently)

Ma'am.

Essex's eyes close and he looks down, expecting the worst.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Hush, Lord Burghley.

(To Grace)

I wish to name you Countess of Mayo. The first to hold that title.

Burghley's head drops. Essex's snaps up. Grace, Conroy and MacNally exchange looks.

ESSEX

We agreed...

BURGHLEY

(Cutting Essex off)

Please, your Majesty. Such matters require careful consideration.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Hush, gentlemen. Lady O'Malley has opened my eyes to a key fact: As powerful as I am, I continue, quite blindly, to play by men's rules. No more. Today, I elevate a worthy woman. Together we shall begin the difficult work of bringing peace and prosperity to Ireland.

(To Grace)

What say you? My path... England's path... leads through Ireland and beyond. It is inevitable. Will you travel it with me?

MACNALLY

(Softly but urgently)

This is a devil's bargain. Do not accept.

Conroy puts a hand on MacNally's shoulder. MacNally shrugs it off.

MACNALLY

(More urgently)

This is a devil's bargain. Do not accept!

Grace glances at MacNally.

GRACE

Easy. Take it easy, son.

MacNally's look is clear: "I am not your son, not if you do this."

GRACE

It is a generous offer, your Majesty.

MACNALLY

Grace...

GRACE

(To Conroy)

If he will not be calm, remove him!

Conroy places his hand more firmly on MacNally's shoulder. MacNally shrugs it off.

GRACE

Your Majesty, I am honored, but...

ESSEX

Ha! She is refusing you.

GRACE

But I have one condition.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

That is?

She moves closer to Grace, all ears.

GRACE

That you remove Bingham as Governor in Mayo. I cannot serve the Crown if it means working with that butcher.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Vey well. That can be arranged.

MacNally lets out a strangled roar and draws the dagger from his boot. He lunges toward Grace. Essex draws his sword, as Conroy steps to intercept MacNally.

QUEEN ELIZABETH & GRACE

No.

Essex, unsure whether MacNally's target is the Queen, draws his sword and also lunges forward. He stabs MacNally, who falls into Conroy, stabbing him instead of Grace. Conroy stands for a moment, looking at the bloody wound in his belly. He falls next to MacNally.

GRACE

No.

She squats next to them.

ESSEX

Your plot against the Queen has failed. You shall hang for this.

GRACE

(To Essex)

He came at me, not the Queen.

Conroy groans. Both men breathe shallowly and grow weaker by the second. Essex seizes Grace by the shoulder. She rises to face him.

BURGHLEY

He came at Lady O'Malley. She speaks truly, Essex.

ESSEX

They brought a weapon into the Queen's presence. That alone...

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Enough, Lord Essex. Leave her be. There was no attempt to harm me. That was never her intent...

(Looking at MacNally)

Or his.

Conroy groans again. Grace kneels beside him.

GRACE

Conroy?

She takes Conroy's face in her hands. Looks over at MacNally.

GRACE

What have I done, my... son?

Her look hardens.

GRACE

(To the Queen)

I will not serve you. Keep your title.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Lady O'Malley. I... I know not what to say.

Squatting next to Grace, she takes Conroy's hand, glares at Essex.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Leave us, Lord Essex. You will answer for this.

ESSEX

I will answer? He drew first!

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Leave us!

Essex stiffens, bows, exits.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

(To Grace)

I pray you, do not allow... Think of the good we might do.

Grace strokes MacNally's head.

GRACE

It's all right, son.

MacNally dies. Grace takes a deep breath, tenderly closes his eyes. She rises, and the Queen rises with her. They stand face to face.

GRACE

Do not talk of the good we might do. You, with your murderous Essexes. Your Bingham. Your Burghleys. I will not have the blood on all your hands... spilled in your name... stain me. You luxuriate in it... as if in a warm bath... too comfortable with the world you know... with your little rooms.

(Pause)

You are old, ma'am. Your window to remake the world is nie closed. Seize these final moments and upend all. Explode those room, step from the gloom, and sail toward the brightening horizon. Then you will have earned the right to have me by your side. I will join that crew.

Grace pauses. She and the Queen look steadily at one another. At last, the Queen looks away.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

(To Burghley)

The letter.

BURGHLEY

(Aside to the Queen)

Ma'am? Consider carefully. She has openly denied your sovereignty. 'Tis treasonous. We should seize her.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Nay. One must be a subject of England to commit treason 'gainst England. 'Tis the truth she speaks, not treason.

(To Grace)

I will earn your love, Lady O'Malley. And if I do... When I do...

GRACE

We will celebrate a new dawn.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

(To Burghley)

The letter, please.

He hands it to her grudgingly.  
Conroy groans. Grace squats next to him again. He dies. Grace looks sadly at his and MacNally's corpses. She rises again, face-to-face with the Queen, who still holds the letter.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Take it, Lady O'Malley. Let their ends mark a new beginning. Return home with my blessing and my protection.

Numb, Grace takes the letter.

GRACE

I must go.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Very well. You are free to do so.

Grace looks at the corpses.

GRACE

What of them?

BURGHLEY

I can have their bodies delivered to your ship.

GRACE

Aye. I would be grateful.

She looks at the letter in her hand, glances at the Queen, exits. The Queen and Burghley watch her off.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

(To Burghley, indicating the bodies)

Treat them with respect.

Dudley and The Unborn enter. The bodies of Conroy and MacNally lie between them and the Queen. They stand at some distance, staring at the Queen, who stares back.

BURGHLEY

I will. Their deaths are... unfortunate.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

(Distractedly)

Mmm.

BURGHLEY

You were brilliant, ma'am. She will be better than an ally now.

The Queen looks at Burghley with distaste. Dudley and The Unborn move toward her. Stopping just before they reach the corpses.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

(To Burghley)

I have no stomach for you, right now. Leave me. Find someone to remove these poor men.

BURGHLEY

As you wish, Your Grace.

Burghley bows, begins to exit. He pauses, glances back, steps into the shadows. He watches the Queen lift her eyes from the corpses to Dudley and The Unborn.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

You must leave me too, my love.

She pauses, takes a step toward The Unborn.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

My loves.

Dudley and The Unborn move past the corpses and toward the Queen. She puts her hands tenderly on Dudley's shoulders.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

It am old and tired, Eyes, but I still have work to do. It will be easier knowing that you wait for me.

She strokes The Unborn's cheek.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

And you.

She pauses, steps away from them. Her look is tender but serious.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Go. It is finally time.

Dudley and The Unborn look at the Queen solemnly. They turn and exit. As the Queen watches them off, Burghley steps from the shadows with a satisfied look. He exits. The Queen kneels beside Conroy, as if preparing to pray. She reaches out and gently closes Conroy's eyes. The lights dim.

CURTAIN

END OF PLAY