

A DIVINE COMEDY

by
Anne M Holmes

Cast of characters:

THOMAS BREND, owner of the Globe Theatre
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, a playwright
ANNE SHAKESPEARE, a playwright's wife
THE DEAN OF LONDON, a dean
THE BISHOP OF LONDON, a bishop
THE EARL OF ESSEX, an earl
ELIZABETH I, a queen
INNKEEPER, an innkeeper
MAID, a maid

SCENE 1: The office of Thomas Brend, manager of the Globe Theatre.

BREND You tryin' to give me an ulcer or somefing, Shakespeare? Heartburn ain't bad enough for you?

SHAKESPEARE What do you mean, Tom?

BREND Listen, Will. I ever steer you wrong? Romans, pageants, that's what theatregoers want. They eat it up. This play, what's it called?

SHAKESPEARE "A Divine Comedy"?

BREND Yeah, yeah, "A Divine Comedy". It's way off beam. Randy archbishops? You're taking the piss, ain't ya? It ain't even some Catholic archbishop. It's a goddamn Church of England archbishop. No way, mate. You seriously suggesting I should stage a play about some randy archbishop keeping a goddamn brothel? Life's tough enough already.

SHAKESPEARE But it's all true, Tom. Anyone will tell you he was a reprobate.

BREND You're killing me, Will. You want true? Write about the plague or the goddamn Inquisition. See how far that gets you. No one wants to know, mate. Romans, that's what they want. I been telling you for years. Look how good you did with Cleo and Julie and whatsisname, you know, Coral's anus or whatever you called him.

SHAKESPEARE I am fatigued with the Romans.

BREND Okay, okay. So you wanna do a comedy. What about the fairies running around the forest on Christmas Eve or whatever it was. Or the Italian guy sorting out the rich bitch. Now that's the sort of sex comedy your average punter likes. Archbishops getting turned on by nuns? Forget it.

SHAKESPEARE Do I understand you are declining to vouchsafe the staging of this thespian endeavour?

BREND Huh?

SHAKESPEARE Are you refusing to stage A Divine Comedy at the Globe?

BREND Speak English, will you? You're almost as bad as your plays. If you're asking if I'm gonna put this play on, the answer is NO. I got my livelihood to think about. You want my theatre to close? You want the Church to finally put me out of business? I got nothing against the Church and they got nothing much against me. I wanna keep it that way.

SHAKESPEARE Then I shall be forced to take the play elsewhere.

BREND Take it wherever you want. Just get it outta my sight. But believe me, mate, nobody else is going to touch this one. Not Phil Henslow at the Rose, not Hal Lanman at the Curtain, nobody. Maybe you can open it out in the shires somewhere, but it'll ruin ya. This play's poison. You're a hot property, Will. You really wanna blow the lot? Take my advice. Throw it away. Go home. Write about the Romans. Do a randy Caesar. They been dead centuries, you can say what you like about them. You could probably even get away with another manic depressive Dane. But ditch the archbishop. Trust me.

SHAKESPEARE That is your final decision?

BREND Yes, it bloody well is.

SHAKESPEARE I feel very strongly about this play. If you refuse to stage it, you may consider my working relationship with the Globe Theatre terminated.

BREND Listen, mate, if this play ever gets on the boards, you'll be terminated.

SHAKESPEARE Good day, sir.

SCENE 2 Shakespeare's home.

Anne enters. The sound of a door slamming. Shakespeare enters.

ANNE Well?

SHAKESPEARE Well what, madam?

ANNE How much did you get for the play?

SHAKESPEARE Nothing.

ANNE Well, when is he going to pay you? We have debts all over town, Will.

SHAKESPEARE I know about our debts, madam. There would not be so many if you were able to manage the household finances more efficiently.

ANNE Don't you start all this again, Will. You're the one who says we have to keep up with the Bacons. They have a cook and a maid and a footman and all we have is one dim-witted girl, fit for nothing. And you won't let me replace her.

SHAKESPEARE She's perfectly serviceable.

ANNE (*nodding*) "Serviceable." Indeed.

Now, when are we likely to see some money from this play of yours?

SHAKESPEARE I fear this one may not pay as well as the others.

ANNE And why not, pray tell? I thought you said this play was something special? I thought you said it was time for a contemporary religious comedy? I thought you said -

SHAKESPEARE (*interrupting*) A Divine Comedy is without doubt the best play I have ever written. However, Master Brend feels it might offend certain parties.

ANNE And what did I tell you? Not that you ever listen to me of course. Did I not tell you that you would not be able to sell a play which makes the church look bad? Well, I suppose you'd better write another play. You have plenty of time. Dinner will not be ready for an hour.

SHAKESPEARE I have no intention of writing another play. I intend to see this play staged, even if it necessitates financing it myself.

ANNE Are you mad? We will end up in the Tower!

SHAKESPEARE And what, pray tell, is so terrible about that? Even the Queen has been incarcerated in the Tower.

ANNE She has rather more influence than us. We would never get out. I know I said I wanted to move to a bigger place, but that was not what I had in mind.

The sound of a knock on the door

SHAKESPEARE See who is at the door, madam.

Anne exits. Shakespeare paces until she returns.

ANNE (*whispers*) It is for you. It is the Dean of London.

SHAKESPEARE Well, show him in.

Anne exits, returns with the Dean

DEAN Master Shakespeare, what a pleasure! I have long been an admirer of your work.

SHAKESPEARE I am flattered, your worship. Madam, do you not need to attend to this evening's repast?

ANNE Not at the moment.

SHAKESPEARE I am convinced I smell burning and would be most grateful if you would investigate.

ANNE Oh, very well.

Anne exits. Sound of door slamming

SHAKESPEARE Which of my humble efforts appealed to your worship?

DEAN Oh, dear me. There are so many to choose from, are there not? And all so excellent.

SHAKESPEARE You are too kind. But was there not one which you enjoyed more than the others?

DEAN Well, let me see. I did so enjoy all the Roman plays. I find history so interesting. Don't you?

SHAKESPEARE I do indeed, your worship. Although I confess I am currently more intrigued by recent history.

DEAN Indeed, yes. (*clears throat*) Oddly enough, I was taking tea with my good friend Thomas Brend today. Such an amusing man. He

told me you have written a new play of a somewhat ecclesiastical leaning. Is this so?

SHAKESPEARE Yes, your worship.

DEAN I would so enjoy reading it. Do you think that would be possible?

SHAKESPEARE Certainly, your worship. I have a copy here, if you would care to peruse it.

Shakespeare hands sheets of paper to Dean, who rifles through them

DEAN My, such a long play! Might it be possible to take it away and read it at leisure?

SHAKESPEARE By all means.

DEAN So kind of you. I shall take great care of it. This is the only copy?

SHAKESPEARE No, there are others.

DEAN Oh, what a pity. I mean, what a pity I cannot stay longer and continue our chat. But I will see you again soon. So nice to meet you.

Lights fade

SCENE 3

The garden of the Bishop of London's palace.

Sound of birds twittering.

DEAN Is it really so bad, Your Grace?

BISHOP Bad? God's teeth, man. One of the leaders of the Church of England portrayed as a drunken lecher and you ask if it is bad?

DEAN Well, by all accounts he was, wasn't he? I personally have heard many tales --

BISHOP *(interrupts)* Never mind what you have heard. Listen to this: "I had rather be a kitten and cry mew than one of these same meter ballet-mongers. More after my heart are they who sweet passion exchange with their lively tongues." You can't have archbishops saying things like that. Take this play back to Master Shakespeare and tell him it is a travesty. The Church will not tolerate the portrayal of an archbishop in such a disgusting light. Convince him it is in his best interest to drop this matter entirely.

Lights fade

SCENE 4 Shakespeare's home

SHAKESPEARE Now is the summer... No. Now is the autumn... No. Now is the WINTER of our... of our...

The sound of a knock on the door

SHAKESPEARE Oh, blast it. Enter!

Dean enters

DEAN Well, well, Master Shakespeare, here I am again. Good day to you, sir.

SHAKESPEARE Good day, your worship. I see you have my play with you. Did you enjoy it?

DEAN Oh, my. It certainly was... interesting. It was, how can I put it? It was quite thought provoking.

SHAKESPEARE I am so glad you feel that way. It is exactly the reaction I had hoped for.

DEAN Yes, well. *(clears throat)* The thing is, I have discussed the play with the Bishop and he agrees your work is extremely thought provoking. But he tends to feel some thoughts ought to remain unprovoked. You know how it is.

SHAKESPEARE Regrettably, I do not, your worship. Pray expand.

DEAN Well, um, the Bishop feels this particular story to be somewhat detrimental to the Church's image.

SHAKESPEARE I'm sorry to hear that. Are my observations about the Archbishop so wildly inaccurate?

DEAN *(clears throat)* Yes, well, as to that, I am not in a position to say. He was somewhat before my time. I have heard - *(stops abruptly)* Yes, well, that is neither here nor there. The thing is, as our friend Thomas would say, this play is bad for business. You know what the people are like. They can be a problem. Some of them resent giving the Church most of the money the Queen does not take. If they were to believe this fanciful work of yours, well, there could be an uprising. You wouldn't want that, would you?

SHAKESPEARE Your worship, I am neither a politician nor a man of the cloth. I am a playwright, a simple story teller. This, I truly believe, is a story well worth the telling.

DEAN Thomas Brend does not, I believe, share your opinion?

SHAKESPEARE Alas, he does not. Nor do many other theatre managers. But, if needs must, I shall finance the production myself.

DEAN Master Shakespeare, I implore you to reconsider.

SHAKESPEARE My mind is made up, your worship.

DEAN Then I regret to say the matter is out of my hands. Good day to you, sir.

Dean exits.

SHAKESPEARE I shall not be swayed by these humourless men of God. This is my best work and I shall see it performed.

Anne enters

ANNE Will, I have just seen the Dean. He did not look pleased.
What have you said to him?

SHAKESPEARE He came to inform me that the Bishop of London feels
my play constitutes a thought which should remain unprovoked.

ANNE And I suppose you provoked him?

SHAKESPEARE Madam, I will not be muzzled by the Church or
anyone.

ANNE You are mad, sir. You cannot simply defy the wishes of the
Bishop of London for the sake of some ridiculous play.

SHAKESPEARE A Divine Comedy is not a ridiculous play.

ANNE I hope you still feel that way when they throw you into the
Tower.

SHAKESPEARE No one will throw me into the Tower.

Lights fade

SCENE 5 The garden of the Bishop of London's palace.

BISHOP I think we may have to throw him into the Tower, my lord
Essex.

ESSEX Oh, surely it need not go that far?

BISHOP This playwright is a stubborn character. A few weeks in
the Tower might cool him off. I am sorry to involve you in this
sordid situation, but you will appreciate from what I have told
you that this play cannot be performed.

ESSEX I agree, your grace. Most unsuitable. I shall visit Master
Shakespeare and attempt to dissuade him.

Lights fade

SCENE 6 Shakespeare's home. ANNE sits on a chair doing
embroidery.

There is a knock on the door. MAID enters, followed by Essex

ESSEX Mistress Shakespeare?

Maid exits

ANNE *(obviously impressed)* I am indeed, sir.

ESSEX I am the Earl of Essex. I would like to see your husband.

ANNE Oh, dear, I fear he is not here at the moment, my lord, but
he should be back soon. Do come in and wait. I'm sorry the house
is in such a state. So difficult to get decent servants these
days. I am a martyr to my household staff. Do sit down. I will
ring for some tea.

She picks up bell, rings

ANNE You would like some tea, wouldn't you? Of course.

Maid enters

ANNE *(cont'd, to Maid)* Where have you been, you stupid girl?
Bring some tea at once. And some cakes.

Maid exits. Anne sighs

ANNE *(cont'd)* Well, my lord, this is indeed an honour.

ESSEX For me as well, madam. Your husband's reputation as a playwright has spread throughout the land. It is fascinating to see the house in which this genius works. And such a charming house. Meeting you also explains where he finds the inspiration for his heroines.

ANNE Oh, my lord, you are too kind.

Maid returns with tray containing silver teapot, cups and a plate of cakes. She places on table, exits.

ESSEX I believe your husband has recently completed another play. Something about the church. A new theme for him, surely?

ANNE Oh, that. Have a rock cake. Fresh baked this morning.

Essex picks up cake, takes a bite

ESSEX *(with a full mouth)* Delishus. Now, about this play.

ANNE Don't blame me. I warned him. I said, Will, stick with the Romans. But of course he never listens to me. I told him. I said, Will, we'll both end up in the tower if you don't put an end to this religious mania of yours.

ESSEX I do not think it will come to that, Mistress Shakespeare. Your husband is an intelligent man. I am sure he will listen to reason.

Sound of a door opening and closing. SHAKESPEARE enters

ANNE Oh, Will, such an honour! Look who is here. The Earl of Essex.

SHAKESPEARE An honour indeed, my lord. What brings you to my humble home?

ANNE *(whispers)* He wants to talk to you about that bloody play.

SHAKESPEARE Thank you, madam. You may leave us now.

ANNE Humph.

ANNE exits

ESSEX Master Shakespeare, it is a pleasure to meet you at last.

SHAKESPEARE The pleasure is mine, my lord.

ESSEX Quite so. Now, about this play of yours. This Divine Comedy. It won't do, you know. It won't do at all. We cannot have this sort of thing performed.

SHAKESPEARE I am sorry to hear you say so, my lord.

ESSEX Look, Shakespeare - may I call you Will? Thank you. Now, see here, Will, all things considered, you've got a pretty good thing going here. You've got some money, which is more than most people can say. You've got a nice house, a nice little wife. Well, she seems very loyal. Anyway, you've got a lot to be thankful for. So, why rock the galleon? Believe me, Will, no one is trying to thwart you. It's just that this play is not going to do anyone any good. Not even you. All right. The Church takes a knocking and you say all to the good. And maybe you are right. Maybe the Church is corrupt. But what good does it do? Think about the people. They need to believe in the Church. They don't have much, you know, poor beggars.

SHAKESPEARE And what little the treasury doesn't take from them, the Church does.

ESSEX What? Oh, well, that's life, isn't it? You cannot have people worshipping in mud huts and you cannot have men of God living in hovels. Wouldn't be right, would it? And someone has to pay for the upkeep of these buildings. Not to mention the rates, which are crippling. Of course, Her Majesty would like to pay all the Church's costs herself, but she needs the money for the navy and the army.

SHAKESPEARE And all her palaces?

ESSEX See here, Shakespeare, you're not suggesting the Queen of England should live in a mud hut, are you?

SHAKESPEARE No, my lord. I am simply suggesting that the people should know the truth about their Church.

ESSEX Damn it, man. The people don't want to know the truth about the Church.

SHAKESPEARE With respect, my lord, I disagree.

ESSEX With respect, Master Shakespeare, it is not up to you to decide. Now listen to me, man. I am attempting to be cordial about this. Do not try my patience. I suggest you heed your good lady, who seems to have grasped the situation far better than you.

SHAKESPEARE My lord, you have not read the play. It is an affectionate look at a man of the world who was also a man of the cloth. I am sure you would not find it offensive. Would you care to have a look at it?

He hands manuscript to Essex, who skims through it

ESSEX (*quoting, astonished*) "Three times hath this wanton made head To warm her cockles and stir the ember of my thrice ten years dormant member, to raise power and heat in juicy thrust At merest fondle of her Circian crest - Miracle-magicking in ecclesiastical breast." God's holy trousers, man, you cannot say things like that. It is ridiculous.

SHAKESPEARE No, my lord, it is the way I write. I find the rhymes most effective.

ESSEX I'm not talking about the rhymes, you clod. "Warm the cockles and stir the ember of my thrice-ten years dormant member"! You cannot have archbishops saying things like that.

SHAKESPEARE A nice turn of phrase, I thought.

ESSEX It's... it's... it's blasphemous, that's what it is.

SHAKESPEARE Oh, surely not, my lord? You have taken it out of context. Perhaps you would care to take the play away and peruse it at your leisure?

ESSEX That I shall. How many copies are there?

SHAKESPEARE Enough.

ESSEX Oh. Well, rest assured, Master Shakespeare, you shall hear more of this.

SHAKESPEARE I look forward to hearing your views, my lord.

ESSEX Good day, sir.

Shakespeare leads Essex out.

SCENE 7 The Queen's chambers.

ELIZABETH enters, reading manuscript. She is followed by ESSEX

ELIZABETH (*chortling*) "This piss-pot of an Archbishop errs ever from the straight and narrow. And yet is not one particle as crooked as I would have him. For I'll warrant you, he hath earned more fame from his prick than ever from his crook." (*She laughs with delight*) Well, Robin, you must agree, it is an amusing play.

ESSEX Hardly for public consumption, Your Majesty.

ELIZABETH Oh, hardly that. You say Master Shakespeare is quite determined to stage the play?

ESSEX I suspect, m'am, the wretched man is some sort of free thinker. A very dangerous type. We will have to deal with him severely.

ELIZABETH Oh, I'm sure we need not go that far.

They exit

SCENE 8

Thomas Brend's office.

BREND Nice to meet ya, Earl. What can I do for ya? Not interested in backing a play, are ya? I got a hot one lined up. Dido of Carthage by Marlowe and Nash. Boy, she was some dame.

ESSEX I'm sure it is an excellent play, Master Brend, but I am here to see you about William Shakespeare.

BREND Oh, him. Great guy, Will. Lotsa talent. But I think he's losing his grip. Got a toucha religious mania, know what I mean? Bishops on the brain. John Q Public don't give a shit about bishops. He likes Romans and Greeks. That's what I tried to tell Will, but he wouldn't listen. If he doesn't watch it, he's gonna be in real trouble. Take it from me. Now, about this Dido of Carthage thing. It's got everything - sex, violence, the lot.

ESSEX I would like to arrange a meeting with Master Shakespeare.

BREND You wanna meet him? That's easy. He lives in this house down -

ESSEX (*interrupting*) I know where he lives, Master Brend. I want you to arrange a meeting somewhere else.

BREND Sure thing, Earl. But it's really not that far to his house. You could -

ESSEX I want Master Shakespeare to be at the Bull and Bush in Southwark at nine o'clock tonight.

BREND Listen, Earl, what's this all about? If the boy's in trouble, I'd like to know.

ESSEX There are some things it is best not to know.

BREND Sure, sure. I get ya. Nice suit, by the way. Who's your tailor?

ESSEX (*distracted*) You like it?

BREND Like it? I LOVE it. Beautiful material. Beautiful finishing. But, then, you've got the figure for it. Now, me, I find getting a decent fit -

ESSEX (*getting back to the point*) Master Brend, I am not interested in your clothing problems. I want you to ensure that William Shakespeare is at the Bull and Bush at nine o'clock. I can assure you that if you fail me there will be consequences.

BREND (*gulps*) Consequences?

ESSEX Dire consequences.

BREND Nine o'clock. Bull and Bush. He'll be there.

ESSEX I knew you were a reasonable man, Master Brend.

BREND Think nothin' of it. Who should he ask for?

ESSEX (*menacing*) Just tell him he's expected.

SCENE 9

Shakespeare's home.

Brend enters

BREND So, listen, Will, you found a backer for that play a yours?

SHAKESPEARE Would that it were otherwise, but verily I have not.

BREND Huh?

SHAKESPEARE No, Tom, I have not found a backer.

BREND See? Ain't it easier when ya speak English?

SHAKESPEARE If you say so, Tom.

BREND I do. Now, listen. You know I think this play a yours is bad news, but I heard a somebody who's interested in the thing. All I want is a promise that, if ya ever get this religious thing outta your system, you'll go back to the Romans, or at least stick to kings. Dead kings.

SHAKESPEARE Tom what a stout fellow you are.

BREND Enough of the stout stuff, if ya don't mind. Now, ya gotta promise.

SHAKESPEARE I promise, Tom, I promise. My word of honour.

BREND Okay. Alls I know is that if ya go to the Bull and Bush in Southwark tonight at nine o'clock, you'll meet someone who's very interested in your play.

SHAKESPEARE Who, Tom, who? Who is my patron?

BREND I ain't allowed to tell ya. He wants to be monotonous, know what I mean. Let's just say he's a rich guy who wants to be a silent partner in a theatrical venture.

SHAKESPEARE A member of the aristocracy?

BREND I ain't sayin'.

SHAKESPEARE Hellfire and damnation. That ass Essex has the only copy of the play.

BREND Don't worry about it. This guy knows the story.

SHAKESPEARE Who should I ask for?

BREND Just tell them who you are. You're expected.

SHAKESPEARE I must make haste if I am to be there by nine o'clock. Oh, Tom, you are a friend indeed!

SHAKESPEARE exits in a rush

BREND Sometimes show biz really sucks.

SCENE 10

The Bull and Bush

Sound of glasses clinking, people talking. SHAKESPEARE enters

INNKEEPER Yes, sir? What can I get for you? Glass of mead? Yard of ale? What's your pleasure?

SHAKESPEARE I want no refreshment, landlord. I have come to meet someone.

INNKEEPER Oh, yeah? Well, I don't want to ruin your day, squire, but this is an inn, not a waiting room. The only waiting that

gets done in here is by me when I wait on you. So, if you don't want a drink, hop it.

SHAKESPEARE I am William Shakespeare.

INNKEEPER Shakespeare, eh? Well, why didn't you say so, squire? You're expected. You want the back room through those curtains.

SHAKESPEARE Thank you, my good man.

INNKEEPER You sure you don't want a drink before you go back there?

SHAKESPEARE Thank you, no.

INNKEEPER Suit yerself, squire.

SCENE 11

The back room of the Bull and Bush.

ELIZABETH is sitting on a chair, the manuscript in her lap.

SHAKESPEARE enters, spots her, gasps

SHAKESPEARE Oh, my God!

ELIZABETH No, Master Shakespeare, just your monarch.

SHAKESPEARE Your Majesty, what can I say?

ELIZABETH I understand, Master Shakespeare. We monarch are an awe inspiring lot, are we not? Do sit down. I wish to discuss your play with you.

She points to the second chair. He sits down.

ELIZABETH *(cont'd)* Tell me, did you ever meet the Archbishop?

SHAKESPEARE *(gulping)* No, ma'm.

ELIZABETH Well, you have painted a remarkably accurate picture of him. Although personally I felt it could have gone further. He was a singularly unpleasant man, a quite disgusting lecher. He even had a go at me once. I kicked him so hard he couldn't stand up straight for a week. But I think you have captured him wonderfully in the description by the Duke of Norfolk. Now, where is it? *(She skims through the pages)* Oh, yes, here we are.

"I do not care. I'll give thrice so much land to any well deserving friend who brings me news of the Archbishop and his licentious ways. I'll not cavil on the ninth part of a hair so that he spy out the scheme of his affairs - And where he lays on hands - and in whose demesne and appendages to base appetite Exploring the secret, corporeal empire Of pimps and whores and harlot boys - Treated one and all as carnal toys." Yes, that was the Archbishop. He was quite an explorer.

SHAKESPEARE *(another gulp)* You liked the play, ma'm?

ELIZABETH Master Shakespeare, we are at war with the bloody Spanish and the treasury is nearly empty. Very little amuses me these days. Your play did.

SHAKESPEARE I am overwhelmed, Your Majesty. Are you... Could you be... Are you my backer?

ELIZABETH *(laughing with delight)* I hardly think so, Master Shakespeare.

SHAKESPEARE Then why am I here, ma'm?

ELIZABETH You are here, Master Shakespeare, because My Lord Essex is hell bent on relocating you to the Tower. I have been domiciled there myself - back in the days when the Archbishop thought he could lay hands on me - and I can assure you it is not a place you would wish to reside. I am told you are determined to stage this play. That would not be at all advisable. As I have pointed out, we are at war with Spain. Those damned dagoes would have the country overrun with incense burners again. You do not want that, do you?

SHAKESPEARE Of course not, ma'm.

ELIZABETH Then why, in Heaven's name, are you playing right into their hands? Can you not see the damage this play of yours could do?

SHAKESPEARE But, ma'm, the man has been dead these twenty-five years. What possible damage can it do?

ELIZABETH Come, come, Master Shakespeare, you cannot be so naïve. Was it not you who coined the phrase "tarred by the same brush"? No? Oh, it must been that Marlowe fellow. No matter. The point is, if one of the heads of the Church of England was corrupt and lecherous, it will naturally follow in the minds of many that all heads of the Church are tarred by the same brush, will it not?

SHAKESPEARE Well, in fairness, ma'm, they are.

ELIZABETH All of them?

SHAKESPEARE So I am led to believe, ma'm.

ELIZABETH You fail to grasp the point, Master Shakespeare. Who is the head of the Church of England?

SHAKESPEARE The Archbishop of Canterbury.

ELIZABETH Think again, Master Shakespeare.

SHAKESPEARE (*gasps*) Well, of course, you are, ma'm.

ELIZABETH Precisely. Now, are you suggesting, for example, that my sobriquet, the Virgin Queen, is a misnomer?

SHAKESPEARE Oh, no, ma'm.

ELIZABETH So?

SHAKESPEARE Oh, ma'm. I had not... I did not... I cannot... What can I... It was not...

ELIZABETH Master Shakespeare, where are the other copies of your play?

SHAKESPEARE This is the only one, ma'm.

ELIZABETH You told My Lord Essex otherwise.

SHAKESPEARE I thought it the best way of ensuring the play's safe return. If there were other copies, there would be no point in destroying this one.

ELIZABETH Master Shakespeare, the fire is getting low, do you not think?

SHAKESPEARE (*another gulp*) Yes, ma'm.

He throws the manuscript on the fire
ELIZABETH Better the play than the playwright, eh?
She chuckles, he nods

SCENE 12

Thomas Brend's office.

BREND Ya gotta be kiddin' me. First ya bring me a randy Archbishop and now this! A goddamn hunchback! What happened to the Romans?

SHAKESPEARE I have already told you, Tom. The Romans fatigue me. You asked for a dead king. I have given you a dead king.

BREND Yeah, but why does he have to be goddamn hunchback?

SHAKESPEARE Because he was. I do not understand your misgivings, Tom. You have always told me that all a play needs is sex and violence. Well, Richard III has an abundance of both. More than any of my Roman plays.

BREND Look, Will, I bin thinkin'. Maybe you're right. Maybe the Romans have had their day. What we need now is somethin' different. Maybe this ain't so bad. Tell ya what. Stick some songs in. We'll make it a musical!

THE END