

The Tragedy of King Robert the First

A Farce in One Act

By

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THE TRAGEDY OF KING ROBERT THE FIRST

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THE TRAGEDY OF KING ROBERT THE FIRST

CAST

7 Men, 4 Women

Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex

Queen Elizabeth the First

The Earl of Tyrone

The Bard

An Executioner

A Chorus of six, 3 M/3 W

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AT RISE: *The stage is set with the accoutrements that will be necessary for the enactment of our story. On it is a Chorus of six actors, equal number of women as men. Each is dressed like a commoner from Queen Elizabeth the First's reign. Each is engaged in preparing for what is to occur during the action of the play. For example, several are practicing their stage combat movements, others are engaged in a game of cards, and one is sharpening his oversized axe, making sure it is ready to do the job it will be asked to do at the play's end. Into this tableau of non-action comes the hero of our play. He introduces himself because he isn't sure that the production's program has been successfully printed.*

ESSEX. I am Robert Devereux, son of Walter Devereux, the First Earl of Essex, and Lettice Knollys, a ward of the powerful Lord Burghley, Queen Elizabeth's Prime Minister of sorts, and stepson of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, favorite of Elizabeth I. Thus, you can see, I am somebody! *(To a member of the Chorus.)* Here, slave, do me. *(The member combs Essex's bountiful*

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hair as he speaks to us.) I pray you will forgive me for boasting, but boasting is what I do best. I am without question the most handsome dude in the kingdom. Am I right?

CHORUS. (*Halfheartedly.*) Yeah. . .

ESSEX. And if I were miraculously transformed into a person of the female gender, I would undoubtedly be the most beautiful woman in the world. Yes?

CHORUS. Yeah. . .

ESSEX. In which case, if Mr. Marlowe had witnessed my beauty, he would have written of me and not Helen of Troy: “The face that sank a thousand ships.” Of course, he would be referring to the demise of the Spanish Armada, which I accomplished almost single-handedly, but that is neither here nor there. I am right, am I not?

CHORUS. Eh. . .

ESSEX. My glamorous face and well-honed body are of little note when compared to my exquisite intelligence. Yes, you are in the presence of a living genius.

CHORUS. Ha. . .

ESSEX. Give me a problem, any problem, as complex as possible, and I will give you its resolution in the twinkling of an eye or the dropping of a tear. Come on, come on, don't be shy. Pose to me what you will.

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CHORUS, COMBING HIS HAIR. (*Pulls a strand of hair from the comb and holds it forth.*) If it is true that every hair on you head is numbered, how many do you have left now that this has been extracted?

ESSEX. Too simple. Five million, four hundred ninety five thousand, six hundred eighty two, assuming that in your strand you hold twelve of my hairs.

CHORUS. Only eleven, sire.

ESSEX. Then, six hundred and eighty three.

CHORUS. How do we know if you are right or not?

ESSEX. You doubt my capacity to know the composition of my own physical being? Rascal. I'll have your head as a personal trophy. Besides, I wouldn't lie. I cannot lie. I must not lie. Telling lies is a sin. And I am above all sin. All.

CHORUS. You are perfect, then?

ESSEX. More than perfect. I am pluperfect! If you don't believe me, ask my mom. She'll confirm not only who or what I am but what I am destined to be.

CHORUS. And that is?

ESSEX. To be King!

CHORUS. Yeah. King of the Liar's Club.

ESSEX. King of this kingdom, you dolt! Robert the First, King of England. I will be the greatest king this kingdom has ever known. I will rule with grandeur over the

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New World which I will rechristen Robertlandia—or maybe New Essex, something like that. My reign will be chronicled throughout the ages as the grandest of them all, the model for all monarchs who have the misfortune of following in my steps. Yes, King Robert the First, the first among monarchs in the history of the world.

CHORUS. Yeah! Boasting is what he does best.

ELIZABETH. *(Entering.)* Do I hear the ravings of my servant, my sex slave, my own Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex?

ESSEX. Here, your Grace. At your service.

ELIZABETH. Whom are you entertaining now, pray tell?

ESSEX. *(Indicating us.)* Them, your Highness, gathered to pay homage to your ethereal being. Kneel, scum, kneel, kneel, kneel! *(Whether or not the audience kneels is yet to be determined; the Chorus kneels, halfheartedly.)*

ELIZABETH. *(To Essex.)* Come with me. *(She leaves, him following like the loyal servant he is, as the Chorus clusters around the curtain through which they have gone. After a momentary pause, sounds of heavy love-making are heard, amplified if necessary. The Chorus moves away from the curtain, speaking intimately to one another as well as to us.)*

CHORUS. Yeah, right on, brother.

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Boasting as an art form.

You ask me, the colony of Virginia is wrongly named.

Maybe the man is the best.

At least at one thing the best—screwing the—

Nyet, nyet, nyet, don't turn naughty.

What a shame the Earl is secretly married.

Secretly? Everybody knows about his molly.

Everybody but the virgin queen, heh, heh, heh.

Shh, shh, she's coming, she's done.

More like, it's him that's done, heh, heh, heh.

ESSEX. *(Returning, adjusting his clothing. One of the Chorus wipes lipstick from his face, giggling as she does so.)*
Right. That was . . .

CHORUS. Best sex of your life?

ESSEX. No, no, no. Oh, no, no, no. Best sex of her life.

ELIZABETH. *(Off.)* What!

CHORUS. Uh, oh.

ELIZABETH. *(Off.)* What is this I hear?

ESSEX. You shrieked, my dear?

ELIZABETH. *(Off.)* Married!?! *(She bursts through the curtain, adjusting her clothing as she comes. She grabs Essex by the hair and pulls him to his tiptoes.)* Married?

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ESSEX. My queen, my sweetums—

ELIZABETH. Don't sweetgums me, you mongrel. Is it true?
You married that winch, Francis Walsingham?
Without my permission? How dare you. Isn't she the
widow of Sr. Philip Sidney? Do you wish to make her
widowed yet again? Answer me!

ESSEX. My wife, yes, and mother of my child. The brightest
young lad in this kingdom as well as the next.

ELIZABETH. Argh! You deceitful, arrogant, sty-keeper. You
foolish pup of a pewter mug. I should throw your
handsome, gloriously proportioned sexy carcass into
the Tower and forget about you as quickly as possible!
Guard! (*A member of the Chorus steps forward.*) Take
him out of my sight this instance. To the Tower, if you
will.

ESSEX. If your Highness no longer wishes to play hide the
zucchini with me, perhaps you might send me to
Ireland rather than to the Tower.

ELIZABETH. Ireland? That god-forsaken cesspool of
corruption and unwashed hair. Just what might you do
in Ireland, hmmm?

ESSEX. Bring that rogue, Tyrone, to his knees. Bring the Irish
Rebellion to its rightful conclusion. I am, of course,
your most accomplished military tactician and valiant
warrior, the solder against whom all future soldiers
will be measured.

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ELIZABETH. God forgive me for cuckolding such a nincompoop. And how would you do such a thing? Taming the Irish has bewildered all others, so what magic do you possess?

ESSEX. *(Of course, he demonstrates each of his boasts to the best of his ability, using a member of the Chorus as his dummy.)* I will engage Tyrone in combat like he has never dreamed. He will crawl before me in absolute defeat and beg of me his life and that of his Irish whore, sometimes called his wife. I will twist his horse from between his legs and leap upon his prone body with frightening speed. I will rip the sword from his grasp and plunge mine own to the hilt in his groin. I will wrap my hands about his throat and twist and twist until his head spins like a top. I will gouge his eyes from his head. I will pluck his tongue from his mouth. I will—

ELIZABETH. Enough! I get the gist. And you will accomplish all of this—this—this carnage on your own?

ESSEX. I might need a few men by my side. A small army. Tiny. No more than ten thousand men. Give or take a few.

ELIZABETH. A small army, you say?

ESSEX. Maybe twenty thousand, not a man more. Armed, of course. And mounted. Naturally. In less than a fortnight, no, even sooner, the Irish revolt will be a thing of the past.

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ELIZABETH. Well. . . *(To the world.)* Make it so. No more than five thousand men, lightly armed, however. That is all the manpower we can afford. This damn recession is killing me. Be gone, be gone, and take your widow with you. I don't care to see the face of Francis Walsingham ever again.

ESSEX. But, my face?

ELIZABETH. What of it?

ESSEX. Is it not worthy of. . . your blessed admiration?

ELIZABETH. Yes. Stop by for a quickie with queeny err you go. *(She exits.)*

ESSEX. A mirror! Quickly, a mirror, a mirror! *(Chorus scurries about, one stepping forward with a small mirror.)* Ah, there you are, my swell fellow. A little touch of rouge. A splash of aqua fleur. A brush with a brush and a squiggle with a tringle. There. All ready. I wish the Irish to see what a true English gentleman looks like when they first encounter me. What do you think? Aren't I what one calls "It on a stick?" Or, "Out of this world, sexy one." Or "If I can't love this, I can't love nothing." Yowser, Whassup! To Ireland we must go! *(He and the Chorus scurry about the stage, basically going in circles, bumping into one another. Essex stops, licks his finger and raises it aloft then sighs with a loud "Ahhh." Then, he points in every direction, sending Chorus about the stage and through the audience. Essex finds the edge of the stage, jumps*

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off, then climbs back up, acting as if he is wet through and through only to stop the commotion with a loud proclamation.) Ah, Ireland. I am dying, Ireland! (A member of the Chorus, dressed like an Irish rebel, rushes Essex. The rest of the Chorus, equally adorned, stand aside as the first rebel attacks. A battle commences. As Essex defeats his first opponent, another rushes forward, then another, and another. Essex fights to the best of his ability but he is overwhelmed. The rebels close in on him. He pulls a sports whistle from his tunic and blows on it.) Time out! Jeez. (The Chorus retires, except the first rebel who takes a seat on the stage floor with Essex.) You guys gotta learn the rules of engagement. Okay? I mean, who ever heard of twelve against one? Not fair, dude, distinctly not fair.

TYRONE. Four, not twelve. And the fourth rebel hardly counts. He's our resident wuss. I guess you noticed that.

ESSEX. And all these strange weapons you brought against me.

TYRONE. You mean, the sling-blades? The garden hoes? The pitch forks? We have to use what we have. No disrespect intended.

ESSEX. And the first rule of any combat. Surely you are aware of the first rule of combat?

TYRONE. What rule might that be, Sport?

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ESSEX. The hero always wins. Oh, for heaven's sake. Isn't that clear to you guys?

TYRONE. I guess that depends on who you consider to be the hero.

ESSEX. Me! Me, me, me! I'm the obvious master here. I'm better dressed, got better make-up, better hair, better weapons, better everything. So, it shouldn't take a playwright to tell you that it's me that is supposed to win. Sheez.

TYRONE. All right, Sport. The next battle, we'll let you win. But after that? But after that, you'll be on your own.

ESSEX. But that one victory is all that I need. Give me a simple, unqualified victory, and I'll be on my way home, the conquering hero, flanked by one of the best armies my Queen will have ever seen.

TYRONE. Tell you what. Let's call this first engagement a draw. That way, we all go home happy. Deal?

ESSEX. Put it there, Sport. *(They go to shake hands, but this turns into a battle of biceps which the rebel wins, who then dances about the stage with his fellow rebels as Essex tries to sooth his aching hand. They remove any battlements as they do so, restored to Essex's entourage once again.)* I can't go home like this. My hair is a mess. My tunic soiled. And on top of that, most of my army has deserted, leaving me virtually alone. I need recruits. New recruits. New Lords and

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Earls and Dukes and Knights. *(To us.)* Okay, tell you what. Each of you raise your right hand. All of you, women, children, old farts, everyone. Raise your right hand and when I lower my sword in your direction, you are to say as loudly as you possibly can: “Yes!” Right. Hands up. Hold them up. Good. I hereby proclaim each of you to be knights Errant in my fateful army! Do you accept my proclamation? *(He points his sword at the audience and receives as many voices saying “Yes” as he might expect. Obviously, there aren’t that many. So, he shrugs, sheaths his sword.)* Stupid crowd. Wouldn’t know a decent deal if it kicked ‘em in the wahzoo. Bunch of English majors, so what do you expect.

ELIZABETH. *(Entering, obviously at home in her private quarters. Her appearance is grotesquely different from how we met her previously: her hair is frizzled, her gown is lumpy, her face a maze of wrinkles and caverns, her girdle hanging limply about her hips. She has in one hand a banana and in the other a zucchini. As she sits to enjoy either or both, Essex storms in, obviously worse for wear from his travels. He stops in his tracks, amazed at the sight before him. She, too, is startled beyond belief. She stands and screams. He screams in return.)* Out! Out! Out!
Outoutoutoutoutoutout. . . *(She, screaming as she flees.)*

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ESSEX. (*Dumbfounded.*) What in hell was that! (*He paces.*) She'll have my head! Well, she can't have it. It is too precious and belongs exclusively to me. She will drag me through the streets. She will ruin me. She, a ruin herself! How can she bear to gaze in a mirror with a visage like that! Ew. I'd kill myself. I would indeed. And I would die hating her, she whom I have loved. . . . Ahh! Heavens. (*To us.*) Knights Errant. The time has arrived. Never has this glorious isle needed me more than now. How can any of you rest knowing what all of us now know: that our sovereign is a hag! Worse than a hag. A hideous one! (*As he continues, the Chorus returns, quietly, not wanting to draw attention to themselves.*) Gentlemen—and ladies, too. The time has come. The rebellion is at hand. The three virtues that we fight to restore—virility, masculinity, and personal beauty—must become our mantra, our catchwords, our standards for our renewed patriotism! The world must belong to those of us who are most worthy of self-worship and of gazing with deep affection into the world of the mirror! Are you with me, soldiers?

CHORUS. (*Halfheartedly*) Yeah. . . .

ESSEX. Where is your enthusiasm?

CHORUS. Enthusiasm for what exactly?

ESSEX. For, for, for, I don't know. For action against the Queen.

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CHORUS. That's a pretty far bridge to cross, Sport.

ESSEX. Help. Obviously, I need help. I need something to rile my legions and gentle followers to take the action we require. Who is good at riling? Who? To whom may I turn in this my greatest moment of need? Who, who, who?

BARD. *(Entering, dressed as Will Shakespeare.)* You called?

ESSEX. Who—

BARD. Precisely.

ESSEX. Did I—

BARD. Somebody did.

ESSEX. Why would I—

BARD. Only you would know.

ESSEX. What do you—

BARD. Do? I think you know that. I think they do, too, or are at least a bit suspicious of my profession.

ESSEX. What might you do—

BARD. Do for you? That is still unresolved, but I am here. We might find a resolution to that question if we search.

ESSEX. Aren't you that—

BARD. Poet? Does it show? Honestly, I work on that aspect of my appearance every day, and you see the results.

ESSEX. I, too, write poe—

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BARD. Poetry as well? So, what is new? Every man in the kingdom past the age of seventeen writes sonnets. How do you expect them to pretend to woo if not with pretty words? Please, share a verse with me. Give me a reason to feel rewarded by my being here.

ESSEX. You want me to—

BARD. Recite? Please. I am all ears. *(He has taken a tablet from his tunic, along with a ball point pen, ready to record Essex's poem.)*

ESSEX. Well, if you—

BARD. Of course. I insist.

ESSEX. *(Strikes a handsome pose, brushes his hair from his eyes, repairs his tunic, and clears his throat.)* As far as queens go, you are supreme./ As far as women go, you are my queen. *(Bard puts his tablet away.)* I'm not finished. . . No matter how stringently I endeavor,/ I cannot void the impulse to be clever.

BARD. Hm. . . Early in my career, I discovered that not all verse need rhyme. At least, not all the time.

ESSEX. But it is the rhyme that makes a poem sublime. Surely, you agree.

BARD. Surely with glee. Well, I have enjoyed our little tete-a-tete, but work calls. I am stumbling through a new play that is at war with my creative compunction.

ESSEX. At war? How—

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BARD. I feel that I have forged an impossible path for my heroine, one Helena. She has married the King's son, Bertram, who despises her intensely, so much so that he proclaims that he will refuse to join his new wife in matrimonial bliss until she has conceived of him and given birth to his son. And my working title? *All's Well That Ends Well*. You see my dilemma.

ESSEX. Sounds kinky.

BARD. *(Taking out his tablet.)* Kinky? That's a new one. I don't know that word.

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