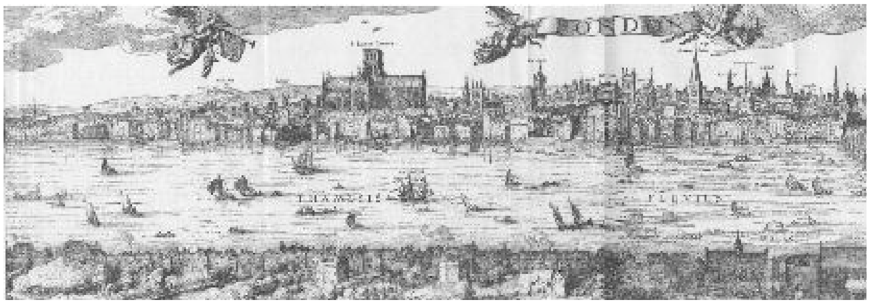

The Jewel Inestimable

> We Princes . . . are set on stages, in the sight and view of all the world duly observed. . . . It behoveth us, therefore, to be careful that our proceedings be just and honourable.
>
> —Queen Elizabeth

> A murderer and a villain,
> A slave that is not twentieth part the tithe
> Of your precedent Lord, a vice of Kings,
> A cutpurse of the Empire and the rule,
> That from a shelf the precious Diadem stole
> And put it in his pocket.
>
> —*Hamlet*
>
> (3.4.107–112)

Arising in the Cotswold hills in Gloucestershire, the river Thames follows a meandering course southeast through Reading and Oxford to London, turns into a wide estuary below Gravesend, and enters the North Sea. In A.D. 43, the invading Romans created their headquarters at Londinium, the highest point, about fifty miles upriver from where the incoming tide brought their ships. Viking raiders continued to plunder the country until peace was restored under King Canute, who built a palace on the site now occupied by Parliament.

Another variety of cultural and spiritual invasion occurred with the arrival of Christianity and the construction of churches, monasteries, and convents on the sites of ancient pagan temples. In 1066, William of Normandy led an invading army from France, conquered the country, and was coronated at Westminster Abbey. Securing the Thames Valley from reprisals by native

Celts, Angles, and Saxons (who themselves had arrived in earlier waves of migrations), William constructed the Tower of London to guard the capital's busy port and built Windsor and several other riverfront castles from which to reign over his new domain.

In the fifteenth century, the Earl of Richmond defeated Richard III at the battle of Bosworth Field and seized the throne. With his victory, the War of the Roses (as dramatized in the Shakespearean history plays) came to an end, and as Henry VII, he inaugurated the Tudor Dynasty. Succeeding his father, Henry VIII inaugurated an era of domestic peace and built the Royal Dockyards at Deptford, laying the foundation for England's naval power. But his bitter divorce with Queen Catherine of Aragon led to a split with Catholicism and continental sanctions. Though the Reformation did not begin to take hold until the brief reign of his son, Edward VI, the savage burnings of Protestants under his daughter, "Bloody" Queen Mary, a Catholic, divided the realm into rival religious camps. When Mary unexpectedly died, Elizabeth inherited the throne in her mid-twenties after undergoing a harrowing childhood and youth. Her mother, Ann Boleyn, had been beheaded for adultery at the command of her father, who had been impatient for a male heir. Elizabeth may have been abused by an older male regent and was locked up by her half-sister in the Tower under suspicion of treason.

The reigns of the Tudor queens coincided with the general ascent of female sovereigns in medieval and Renaissance Europe. The rise in women's influence during this period paralleled the emergence of the chess queen and its transformation into the most powerful piece on the board.[1] For centuries, the king's principal aide in the royal pastime had been the *vizier*, the chief steward or councilor, and the movement of both male pieces was limited to one square at a time. After the Arabs brought the game to Spain, the *vizier* underwent a change in gender, and by the time of Queen Isabella, the queen could move vertically, horizontally, or diagonally across the entire board in the manner that the Spanish sovereign had consolidated her realm with a marriage to Ferdinand and launched Columbus's voyage to the New World.

Not surprisingly, many political metaphors of the day invoked chess. In a letter to William Cecil (Lord Burghley), Elizabeth's principal councilor, Lord Admiral Charles Howard warned of the Spanish threat: "The plot is great and dangerous that is laid; and although it hath been once checked, the malice was not gone, nor the game ended. We must look for more play."[2] In the scene in which the play-within-the-play is performed in *Hamlet*, there are sixteen actors on stage, the same number of pieces per side in a chess game.

The royal contest pitted Elizabeth against Philip II of Spain (who was married to Queen Mary before she died) and his array of forces: the Dukes of Alba and Parma (his harsh military commanders in the Netherlands), Sir William Stanley (captain of a regiment of English expatriates), and other military "rooks"; the pope, Jesuit priests that infiltrated into England, and other "bishops"; and the Duke of Guise (the cunning French powerbroker) and other Catholic "knights." When the pope declared Elizabeth a heretic and freed English Catholics from fealty to their Protestant sovereign, Philip hoped to checkmate the island's sovereign. However, through a brilliant series of combinations, culminating in the elimination of her Catholic cousin Mary Queen of Scots, who once ruled France and Scotland and had designs on England, Elizabeth won the game. Philip rallied for a return match, sending his Armada streaking up the Channel toward the mouth of the Thames, but once again he was outwitted. One of Elizabeth's most famous portraits shows the invading Spanish fleet behind her throne. "God breathed and they were scattered," she observed in a tone worthy of Jehovah in the Protestant Bible.[3]

Protecting the sceptred isle from foreign invasion constituted a lofty goal, and the Marlovian and Shakespearean plays helped mobilize public support, uniting Protestant and Catholic alike against the common foe. But an even greater ideological contest pitted the prerogatives of Crown and Church against freedom of conscience and what were traditionally known as "ancient liberties." Elizabeth's spiritual advisor, Archbishop John Whitgift, whom she endearingly called her "little black husband," exercised absolute control over the Church of England.[4] The reign of terror that he inaugurated was compared by Burghley to the Spanish Inquisition and led to the arrest and "death" of Christopher "Kit" Marlowe, London's leading playwright. It also forms the background to what we might call the Shakespeare Compact—the arrangement to bring out Marlowe's continuing works in collaboration with actor Will Shakespeare.

For the better part of a decade, the Earl of Leicester, the queen's longtime favorite; Sir Francis Walsingham, the secretary of state and head of the secret service; and other powerful nobles performed the roles of castles or rooks, using their influence to thwart Elizabeth's and Whitgift's most flagrant attempts to rule by divine fiat and to silence their critics. The Puritans, led by Rev. Thomas Cartwright, and supported by Sir Francis Knollys, the queen's cousin and the treasurer of her household, served as counter bishops, moving diagonally to challenge the absolutism of the Church and promote presbyterian and congregational reforms. The knights errant—Martin Marprelate, the satirical jester, and the Earl of Essex, the queen's current favorite—drove the archbishop and queen to distraction with their quixotic, but tactically brilliant maneuvers. On the London stage, Kit

Marlowe, the prince of poets and lord of misrule, fashioned a counter myth to the cult of the Virgin Queen and the tyranny of chastity, married love, and glory on the battlefield.[5] Celebrating romantic love, personal freedom, and religious pluralism. Kit's poems and plays suggested that obedience was due ultimately not to crowned monarchs and sceptered bishops, but to poets, sages, and prophets who kept the true conscience of the realm.

For England's yeomen, the peasantry, and other humble pawns in this drama, royal pomp and circumstance was largely a diverting spectacle that did not directly impact their lives. The Thames was important neither for its glittering necklace of castles, forbidding fortresses, and bankside theaters, nor for the courtly birds of a feather—little eyases, croaking ravens, and upstart crows—that inhabited them. But as the main artery for commerce and industry, its mills, fisheries, and wharves helped grind the corn, put bread and fish on the table, and pay the quitrent. As the heart of England, the Thames—like the Nile in Egypt, the Ganges in India, and the Mississippi in America—shaped and defined that nation. And in its heart of hearts, in a tiny island near Runnymede, King John signed the Magna Carta—the Great Charter—in 1215 that recognized the inviolable rights of ordinary people—the Commons. For upholding the principles enshrined in the historic document, lawyer Henry Barrow, clergymen John Greenwood and John Penry, poet Christopher Marlowe, and other "sectaries," "schismatics," and "atheists" would pay a heavy price in the spring of 1593. But out of their tribulations on behalf of liberty, was born "the jewel inestimable" in the words of parliamentary leader James Morice, or what Hamlet calls "the precious Diadem," the modern democratic impulse.[6]

Though she styled herself as Gloriana (the resplendent mistress of the sun), Cynthia (the chaste goddess of the moon), and Astraea (the impartial guardian of justice and the public morals), Elizabeth in the end metamorphosed into Hecate (the divine witch and goddess of the dead), who appears throughout the Marlovian and Shakespearean works. The specter of freedom, more than that of her own tortured past, haunted England's Virgin Queen until her own final excursion by funeral barge on the graceful, all-forgiving Thames. As Mary Queen of Scots warned her captors before her trial and execution, "Remember that the theater of the world is wider than the realm of England."[7]

For four centuries, the world has been led to believe that Marlowe—"the muses darling"—died a tragic death. The comical history of Christopher Marlowe, clown prince of England, and his dramatic partner, William Shakespeare, is more improbable, enchanting, and sublime than anything they ever wrote or staged.