THE AHL AL-MULK WA'L-'AQL CHRONICLES

ALI SHAKESPEAR

THE QUEEN'S ENGLISH

A HISTORY IN FIVE ACTS

ENGLAND / CAIRO / BAGHDAD

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WORKING STAGE DRAFT / NOVEMBER 2026

ALI SHAKESPEAR

The Queen's English

A HISTORY IN FIVE ACTS, WITH A PROLOGUE

ENGLAND, 1598.

Sixty-five years after Henry VIII entered Islam, his daughter Elizabeth bint Henry rules a kingdom whose Catholic enemies regard the conversion as an unfortunate temporary episode.

Cairo's Fatimid imamate endures. Baghdad's Mu'tazili Republic governs through its House of Reason and House of Transmission. The Buyid princes finance several sides at once.

England follows the Tudor doctrine of Ahl al-Mulk wa'l-'Aql, the People of Kingship and Reason, founded after Henry's consultations with Andalusian qadis and an Ismaili da'i.

To create an English literary empire, the queen has summoned Ali Shakespear, a playwright of English and Egyptian parentage.

His first commission concerns the history of the Crown.

A fictional alternate history / v0.2 / 7 November 2026

PROLOGUE: A KING IN THE MARKET OF LAW

Scene I. The Andalusian consultation

Greenwich Palace, 1532. A long table. Latin and Arabic books lie beside a marriage contract. HENRY VIII has summoned three visitors from al-Andalus: QADI IDRIS AL-QURTUBI, a Maliki jurist; QADI YAHYA AL-ISHBILI, a jurist of the Shafi'i school; and SHAYKH HUSAYN OF TOLEDO, a theologian fond of distinctions. THOMAS CROMWELL takes notes.

HENRY

Learned gentlemen, England welcomes you.
You find us at a moment of inquiry.

IDRIS

May God grant wisdom to your inquiry, sire.

HENRY

The pope has refused my divorce.

YAHYA

We were informed.

HENRY

Then perhaps we may omit the tedious preface.
If a Christian king should enter Islam,
May he dissolve his Christian marriage?

IDRIS

A man who embraces Islam enters obligations
Which he must study before he judges them convenient.

HENRY

But may he dissolve it?

IDRIS

There are circumstances and procedures.
The marriage, the parties, their faith,
And their rights must first be examined.

HENRY

I had hoped to begin with a simpler proposition.

HUSAYN

The law favors clarity, Majesty.
Clarity sometimes requires detail.

HENRY

And the woman?

YAHYA

Has rights.

HENRY

I have encountered the same objection
In every court of Europe.

IDRIS

She may have a right to her maintenance,
To the property promised in the marriage,
And to treatment that meets the law's standard of justice.

HENRY

You speak with great confidence.

IDRIS

I am certain that the woman exists.

CROMWELL lowers his pen. HENRY regards the qadi with interest.

HENRY

Suppose further that the king desires
To establish a school of religion
Under the authority of his own crown.

YAHYA

He may patronize scholars.

HENRY

And appoint its legal judgments?

YAHYA

A judge must know the law.

HENRY

I shall appoint men who know it.

IDRIS

Their judgments must remain answerable
To the evidence and principles of the law.

HENRY

And to the king?

IDRIS

When the king submits a lawful case,
He appears before the judge as a litigant.

HENRY slowly puts down his fig.

HENRY

In England we have somewhat different customs.

HUSAYN

That is why the consultation may be useful.

HENRY

I have heard that Muslim sovereigns
May take more than one wife.

YAHYA

They are commanded to act justly.

HENRY

Again this word.

IDRIS

It occurs often in our scripture.

HENRY

I had hoped your scripture might provide
A sovereign with a greater range of action.

HUSAYN

It speaks frequently of sovereigns
Who supposed themselves entitled to one.

HENRY

And were they prosperous?

HUSAYN

For a time.

An uncomfortable pause.

HENRY

Would your school recognize a king
Descended from David as a sacred ruler?

IDRIS

A genealogy is examined as a claim of fact.

A ruler's conduct is examined as a claim of justice.

HENRY

Then it would change nothing.

IDRIS

A true genealogy would tell us who his fathers were.

HENRY

And an imamate?

YAHYA

We are Sunni jurists, Your Majesty.

HENRY

Yes, yes. And remarkably serious ones.

He rises.

I had been told Andalusian civilization
Was famous for its gardens, music,
And the delights of philosophical company.
You have brought me maintenance payments,
Rules of evidence, and the Day of Judgment.

IDRIS

All of them may be found in Andalusia.

HENRY

I had hoped for more of the gardens.

CROMWELL

Your Majesty, the gentlemen have been most generous.

HENRY

Indeed. They are learned, honorable,
And utterly without amusement.

The visitors bow with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

HENRY

Cromwell. Who else is in the market?

CROMWELL

The Fatimid court has sent a diplomatic packet.
Its representatives include a missionary of the imamate.

HENRY

The Ismailis?

CROMWELL

Yes, sire. They possess an account
Of the inner meaning of revelation,
An extensive tradition of philosophy,
And an imam-caliph whom they acknowledge
As a descendant of the Prophet.

HENRY

Now that sounds more promising.
Send to Cairo.

IDRIS

Majesty, the truth is not improved
By the number of jurists you interview.

HENRY

Perhaps. Yet England will be much improved
By knowing what each of them proposes.

He bids them farewell. CROMWELL follows him to the door.

CROMWELL

Which answer displeased Your Majesty most?

HENRY

The one where I had to behave myself.

Scene II. The visitor from Cairo

Some weeks later. The same chamber, with a new map. NASIR AL-QAHIRI, an Ismaili da'i and envoy of the Fatimid court, has arrived with an astronomer, a secretary, and a chest of manuscript volumes. HENRY and CROMWELL receive him. The Andalusian jurist IDRIS has been invited to remain as an observer.

NASIR

I bring greetings from the court of Cairo
And the prayers of those who follow the imamate.

HENRY

You are welcome. I am told your people
Preserve the secret learning of the ancients.

NASIR

We study the outward and inward senses
Of revelation, Majesty. The senses are examined
By teaching, reasoning, and a living tradition.

HENRY

A living imam?

NASIR

Our caliph claims the inherited guidance
Of the Prophet's household through Fatima and Ali.
His lineage is an important claim,
And his duties extend beyond its possession.

HENRY

Does reason govern revelation?

NASIR

Reason is a gift through which human beings
May recognize signs, distinguish arguments,
And receive instruction. Its exercise
Requires patience and discipline.

HENRY

And kingship?

NASIR

A sovereign who commands others
Has reason to fear the weight of his account.

HENRY

I have already been introduced to that account.

NASIR

Then your Andalusian guests served you well.

HENRY

They served me with admirable severity.
Their school lacks a certain poetry.
If I enter your tradition,
May I become imam of England?

NASIR

That is a claim with theological consequences.
I cannot confer the Fatimid succession
Upon a man because he rules an island.

HENRY

Suppose I descend from David.

NASIR

Then establish the genealogy.
David was a prophet and a king.

His honor is not a license for a later sovereign
To invent a chain of descent.

HENRY

You and Qadi Idris agree more than I anticipated.

IDRIS

It has been known to happen.

HENRY

But your imam governs a realm.
Your tradition knows the majesty of kingship,
The usefulness of symbols, the education of elites.
A crown has more than a legal function.

NASIR

Certainly. Ceremonies persuade.
So do poems, roads, hospitals, and ships.
A wise ruler learns why they persuade
And what they cost his people.

HENRY

At last, a man who understands the theater
Of government.

NASIR

Every theater has an audience, sire.
The sovereign must someday hear its judgment.

NASIR opens a manuscript.

NASIR

You also asked about divorce.
A change of faith may entail a legal proceeding.
Its conditions can be examined.
You will find no doctrine in these volumes
That declares a sincere conversion
Equivalent to an exemption from justice.

HENRY

Am I to discover no delightful religion
In all the eastern world?

NASIR

The delight belongs to those who seek God.

HENRY

Then I shall seek Him.
But if the Fatimid throne belongs to Cairo

And the Sunni courts decline to flatter me,
England must devise a settlement of its own.

IDRIS

An English school may study and reason.
It will still be judged by the truth of what it teaches.

HENRY

Then let it be judged.

The king looks through the manuscripts. His appetite for doctrinal architecture is unmistakable.

HENRY

Cromwell, fetch the Welsh chronicles.
And summon the royal antiquaries.

CROMWELL

For the genealogy?

HENRY

For the beginning of it.

Scene III. The naming

Greenwich. A late night. HENRY, CROMWELL, IDRIS, and NASIR sit amid chronicles, drafts, and royal seals. ANNE BOLEYN enters at intervals, impatient with the hours devoted to theology.

HENRY

Here are the propositions.
God is one. Muhammad is His messenger.
Ali is honored among the first of the believers,
And the household of the Prophet is worthy
Of remembrance, devotion, and study.

NASIR

You shall need to clarify the source
And scope of the authority you attribute to them.

HENRY

I shall employ scholars for that purpose.

IDRIS

Their independence should be secured.

HENRY

A dangerous habit, but write it down.

CROMWELL

And the government of England?

HENRY

A sovereign kingdom beneath God.
We shall investigate our descent
From the ancient kings of Israel.
The people may know the line of David
As the ancestral pattern of English kingship.

NASIR

You have yet to prove the descent.

HENRY

Then I commission its examination.
Reason shall sit beside royal authority
And inspect the propositions of the state.

IDRIS

It must be free to reject them.

HENRY looks from one scholar to the other.

HENRY

You demand much of an English king.
Perhaps that is why I require your learning.

CROMWELL

What shall we call the school?

HENRY

Ahl al-Mulk wa'l-'Aql.
The People of Kingship and Reason.

CROMWELL

It sounds as if it has existed a thousand years.

HENRY

Then we have made an admirable beginning.

NASIR

A beginning is judged by what follows it.

HENRY

You shall both be invited to inspect our articles.
Cromwell, I will make the testimony.

The room grows still.

HENRY

There is one God, and God alone is God;
Muhammad is His messenger.

IDRIS

May God receive your testimony.

NASIR

And guide your conduct.

HENRY

Amin.

A brief silence.

HENRY

Now we must attend to the marriage.

IDRIS

And to the woman.

HENRY

I shall attend to both.

ANNE enters.

ANNE

Has His Majesty finished founding a religion?

HENRY

Nearly, sweetheart.

ANNE

Then perhaps he will come to supper.

HENRY

I shall.

ANNE

And should God give us a daughter,
What shall she inherit?

HENRY

England.

ANNE

And the arguments?

CROMWELL

I shall arrange them, madam.

ANNE

Then God preserve the child.

Darkness.

ACT I: THE INVENTION OF ENGLAND

Scene I. A printing house near St Paul's

London, 1598. The old tower of St Paul's has been fitted with a minaret, though Catholic bells still ring from some corners of the city. A call to dawn prayer fades among the cries of fishmongers.

ALI SHAKESPEAR, thirty-four, has an Egyptian mother and an English father. He is correcting a manuscript with ink upon his sleeves. CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE sleeps on unsold books. SAFIYYA AL-MISRIYYA, Ali's mother, enters with bread.

SAFIYYA

Ali.

ALI

Mother.

SAFIYYA

You have been awake all night.

ALI

I was writing.

SAFIYYA

You were writing yesterday.

ALI

It has become my profession.

SAFIYYA

So has owing your printer money.

ALI

He has a noble appreciation of my work.

SAFIYYA

He has a wife and five children.

ALI

His children shall inherit the first editions.

SAFIYYA

They would prefer breakfast.

She sets down the bread.

SAFIYYA

What is this newest piece?

ALI

A tragedy of a prince in Denmark
Who discovers that his father's ghost
Has something to say about the government.

SAFIYYA

And does he listen?

ALI

For nearly five acts.

SAFIYYA

Then the ghost is an Egyptian father.

MARLOWE awakes.

MARLOWE

An Egyptian father would have resolved the plot
Before the interval and married off the prince.

SAFIYYA

Christopher, if I wished advice from a man
Who spent last night beneath a table,
I would have addressed the table.

MARLOWE

Madam, your wisdom exceeds Alexandria.

SAFIYYA

It exceeds your rent.

She goes to the back room.

MARLOWE

What hour?

ALI

The hour in which poets must work
And university men must seek employment.

MARLOWE

I have employment. I am writing a play.

ALI

About?

MARLOWE

An emperor who conquers Asia.

ALI

You wrote that last month.

MARLOWE

This one conquers it again.

MARLOWE takes up a page.

MARLOWE

"To be, or not to be."

That is rather good.

ALI

I had hoped so.

MARLOWE

What follows?

ALI

I have spent four days attempting to decide.

MARLOWE

Give the fellow a sword.

ALI

He has a sword.

MARLOWE

Then have him use it.

ALI

He is considering whether existence
Is tolerable under the circumstances.

MARLOWE

And this must take five acts?

ALI

The question seems to demand them.

MARLOWE

Your Egyptian half has made you a philosopher.

ALI

My English half has ensured that I remain
Unemployed while philosophizing.

NED, the apprentice, rushes in with a messenger from Greenwich. The royal Keeper of the Press, SIR EDMUND VANE, enters.

VANE

Ali ibn John Shakespear?

ALI

I have the misfortune of being him.

VANE

Her Majesty Elizabeth, Daughter of Henry,
Queen of England, Defender of the Covenant,
Protector of the People of Kingship and Reason,
Requests your immediate attendance.

ALI

On what charge?

VANE

The queen has read your plays.

MARLOWE

A capital offense.

VANE

Her Majesty desires to employ you.

ALI

I am already employed.

VANE looks around.

VANE

It is difficult to tell.

ALI

I write for the theater.

VANE

The queen requires something larger.

ALI

A longer theater?

VANE

An empire.

Silence.

MARLOWE

I knew I should have gone to Greenwich.

Scene II. Greenwich, the council of maps

ELIZABETH BINT HENRY sits beneath the Tudor rose and a sword attributed to Ali. Above her is the maxim JUSTICE IS THE FOUNDATION OF KINGSHIP. NAFISA AL-BASRI is ambassador from the Mu'tazili Republic. LADY ZAYNAB BINT IDRIS represents the Fatimid court.

ELIZABETH

The ambassador from Baghdad has informed us
That the House of Transmission has rejected
Our proposed commercial agreement.

NAFISA

It has referred the agreement for clarification.

ELIZABETH

For what reason?

NAFISA

A report alleges that English merchants
Are excessively fond of dancing
At the conclusion of contracts.

ELIZABETH

And the House of Reason?

NAFISA

Approved the agreement by eighty-four votes.

ELIZABETH

Then why does the treaty remain unsigned?

NAFISA

The House of Transmission is considering
Whether the reported dancing is lawful.

ELIZABETH

Could you instruct them to stop dancing?

NAFISA

They have not begun dancing, Majesty.
They are discussing it.

ELIZABETH

I see.

NAFISA

The chamber was created to bring
The Ahl al-Hadith within the constitution.
It has prevented three civil wars.

ELIZABETH

How many debates?

NAFISA

We have ceased counting.

ZAYNAB

In Cairo we have taken a different approach.

ELIZABETH

You have an imam-caliph.

ZAYNAB

And a treasury that can pay shipwrights
While our theologians disagree.

NAFISA

The Republic pays its shipwrights.

ZAYNAB

After committee.

NAFISA

The Fatimid court has committees.

ZAYNAB

Our committees are aware of the ships.

ELIZABETH

Ladies. The Buyid princes have offered
To finance England's western expedition.

NAFISA

They have also offered to finance its opposition.

ELIZABETH

They are remarkably industrious.

ZAYNAB

Their bankers believe every revolution
Deserves a line of credit.

A herald announces ALI. He enters, bows, and approaches the table.

ELIZABETH

You are the son of an Egyptian woman.

ALI

I have never been permitted to forget it.

ELIZABETH

And an English father.

ALI

Who has spent thirty years explaining
That poetry is an unfortunate profession
For the son of a respectable glove-maker.

ELIZABETH

Yet you write a very curious English.

ALI

It is the one I was given.

ELIZABETH

Your plays have traveled to Calais,
Antwerp, Alexandria, and Venice.

ALI

In Alexandria they performed the second act
With the first act of a Persian comedy.
In Venice they married off my villains.

ELIZABETH

Then you know how language escapes its author.

ALI

It is its most persistent talent.

She motions toward the map.

ELIZABETH

The Spanish king possesses great ships.
The Roman pontiff possesses ancient claims.
The Fatimids possess the eastern sea.
Baghdad possesses a republic
Which may someday finish discussing dancing.

The Buyids possess everybody's debts.

What does England possess?

ALI

A queen.

ELIZABETH

An expensive possession.

ALI

Wool, tin, ships, merchants,
And a distressing number of lawyers.

ELIZABETH

And a language.

My father commanded this island
To change its manner of addressing God.
Europe has sent soldiers, priests,
Incendiaries, and assassins
To persuade us to change it back.

Our ships have defeated their ships.
Yet every Spanish boy is taught
That England is a kingdom temporarily stolen
From the proper order of the world.

I intend to change the order
In which the world remembers us.

ALI

By what means?

ELIZABETH

Books.

The common speech of England
Shall become the speech of courts and merchants.
Its plays shall be performed on foreign stages.
A child born beyond the sea
Shall know our kings before his own,
And perhaps imagine kingship
In words we have provided him.

For this I require a playwright.

ALI

A language is a troublesome instrument
For any sovereign wishing to govern its meaning.

ELIZABETH

Then I have chosen the proper man
To teach me how it behaves.

VANE

The Crown proposes an exclusive commission
For twelve histories, a translation bureau,
And overseas publication under royal license.

ZAYNAB

Cairo will require Arabic editions.

NAFISA

Baghdad will require freedom of commentary.

VANE

Her Majesty shall approve every edition.

ALI

Then the queen desires to write twelve histories
And employ me to hold the pen.

ELIZABETH

I desire histories men will willingly read.

ALI

Then they must contain people
Who may occasionally be wrong.

ELIZABETH

Even kings?

ALI

Especially kings.

The queen regards him.

ELIZABETH

My father has been dead forty years.
I think his reputation may endure it.

Our first subject is The Daughter of David,
The founding of the English covenant.

ALI

Has the genealogy been verified?

VANE

By royal antiquaries.

ALI

Have they agreed?

VANE

They have been paid.

ALI

A distinction of some consequence.

NAFISA

Baghdad retains copies of the Tudor
Correspondence with Cairo's scholars.

ZAYNAB

As does the Fatimid archive.

ELIZABETH

Then the history of my house
Is the property of every capital except London.

She gives ALI a bound volume.

ELIZABETH

My father's articles of faith. Read them.
I would have England loved by men
Who have never seen her shores.
And I would dearly like to know
Whether my father was telling the truth.

Blackout.

Scene III. Islington, after prayer

North London. A crowd outside the mosque. YUSUF AL-HOLLOWAY, a London-born Salafist preacher, stands on an overturned barrel. His accent is unmistakably North London.

YUSUF

Bruv, I'm asking one question.

Where's the evidence?

Man says he's descended from Dawud,
alayhi salam. Serious claim, yeah?
Proper big claim.

So I ask the court: show us the chain.

They send me a document about a Welsh prince,
some Roman bloke, a princess nobody's heard of,

and Henry the Eighth.

Henry the Eighth!
The geezer who found Islam the same afternoon
he found out he could divorce his missus.

The crowd laughs.

BILAL OF EDMONTON

They've got three hundred years missing
from the family tree.

YUSUF

Three hundred years, bruv!
Man's got a chain of transmission
with a hole big enough for the Fatimid navy.

A MERCHANT

The queen's scholars call you a rebel.

YUSUF

Ask for a receipt at the market
and you're a customer.
Ask for one from the Crown
and suddenly you're plotting treason.

An older scholar interrupts.

SCHOLAR

In Baghdad such questions are considered
By the House of Transmission.

YUSUF

We're in Islington, uncle.

SCHOLAR

The process permits the submission
Of disputed reports and their authorities.

YUSUF

How long would it take?

SCHOLAR

That depends on how many authorities
Each disputant intends to cite.

YUSUF

So we're dead, then.

SISTER JOAN, a Catholic nurse, passes carrying medicines. A young man points at her.

YOUNG MAN

There's one of Rome's lot.

YUSUF

Allow it.

YOUNG MAN

Her people keep attacking us.

YUSUF

She patched up my brother's leg
when he fell off a roof.

YOUNG MAN

Still Catholic.

YUSUF

Yeah, and you're still an idiot.
Both things can be true.

JOAN nods and continues. A STRANGER hands BILAL a bundle of freshly printed broadsheets.

BILAL

Who paid for these?

STRANGER

Friends of the truth.

He disappears.

BILAL

Yusuf. These say every theater in England
should be closed, the queen's taxes refused,
and everyone should assemble on Saturday
at Shakespear's new play.

YUSUF

I didn't write that.

BILAL

And there's no printer's name.

YUSUF

Nah. This is bait.
Someone wants us kicking off.

BILAL holds the page to the light. There is a Tudor rose with a shortened petal.

YUSUF

Who's got access to paper like this?

The call to prayer sounds.

YUSUF

Keep the boys away from that theater.

BILAL

You think it's the Catholics?

YUSUF

I think someone's taking us for mugs.

ACT II: THE BOOK OF KINGS

Scene I. Safiyya's house

Evening. SAFIYYA is mending a shirt. ALI enters with the royal articles.

ALI

Mother, did Grandfather ever speak
Of Henry's conversion?

SAFIYYA

Frequently.

ALI

And of the lineage from David?

She stops sewing.

SAFIYYA

Why?

ALI

The queen has commissioned a history
And wishes me to establish her ancestry
Through the kings of Judah.

SAFIYYA

And she intends to pay you?

ALI

Generously.

SAFIYYA

Your grandfather was also paid generously.

She opens a chest.

He was Yusuf al-Misri of Alexandria,
A translator of Greek, Hebrew, and Arabic.
He was hired to examine documents
Concerning the British kings.

She takes out a leather manuscript.

SAFIYYA

Read the conclusion.

ALI

"The Welsh accounts preserve traditions
Of a family arriving from the eastern sea.
Their relation to the kings of Israel
Cannot presently be demonstrated."

He turns a page.

"No continuous genealogy has been produced.
The proposed identification rests on conjecture."

SAFIYYA

He wrote those words three times.
They disappeared from the royal editions.

ALI

Did Henry know?

SAFIYYA

Your grandfather gave him the report.
Henry asked whether a more favorable authority
Might be consulted.

ALI

Was one found?

SAFIYYA

Several.

ALI

And the evidence?

SAFIYYA

None.

ALI sits.

ALI

Why did you keep it secret?

SAFIYYA

Your grandfather had children to feed.
After he protested the changes,
The court threatened his pension.
He carried the original home to Alexandria.

I remember the refugees arriving there.

Catholic families escaping the English wars.
English Muslims escaping Catholic armies.
Welsh monks who feared the commissioners.
Every man had a story of righteousness.
Every child had a story of hunger.

ALI

Yet he continued in royal service.

SAFIYYA

Yes.

ALI

Then I must tell the queen.

SAFIYYA

Your father made gloves.
A badly made glove could be examined
By turning it inside out.
The English crown is a harder article.

ALI

Perhaps I should write a comedy.

SAFIYYA

A king became Muslim to obtain a divorce,
Shopped among qadis until he found
An Ismaili willing to explain the imamate,
Then declared himself descended from David
And founded a new religion around his crown.
What makes you think it requires embellishment?

ALI laughs.

ALI

You have spent too many years among Englishmen.

SAFIYYA

I married one. It was sufficient education.

She gives him the manuscript.

Scene II. The Fatimid residence

Ships from Alexandria unload paper on the Thames. ALI meets ZAYNAB and NAFISA in a garden.

ZAYNAB

Your mother has written to me.

ALI

She writes to everyone who frightens me.

ZAYNAB

Then give her less cause.

Six centuries ago the Fatimid state
Might have perished from its quarrels.
Instead Egypt endured. Its treasury
Funds schools in Sicily, caravans in Yemen,
And a hospital in Alexandria
Where your mother was born.

ALI

A triumph of patience.

ZAYNAB

A triumph of administration.
Patience helped.

NAFISA

The Republic has made the same discovery.

ALI

By founding the House of Transmission?

NAFISA

We gave the Ahl al-Hadith
An opportunity to submit evidence,
Question ministers, and delay legislation.
The House of Reason may override a remand
After the prescribed period.

ALI

How long is that?

NAFISA

Forty days.

ALI

Merciful God.

NAFISA

We are considering reducing it.

ALI

In which chamber?

NAFISA

The House of Transmission.

They laugh.

ZAYNAB

The queen has asked our governments
To cooperate in her literary enterprise.

ALI

You intend to assist?

ZAYNAB

Cairo will require its own translations.
The queen hopes to purchase the world's imagination.

NAFISA

Baghdad intends to print commentary
In the margins.

ALI

Then we shall have an empire of footnotes.

NAFISA

History has produced worse empires.

ZAYNAB opens a diplomatic packet.

ZAYNAB

Our archivists possess the original report
Of your grandfather's objections to Henry.
The correspondence is already on the river.

ALI

Then the alteration can be established.

ZAYNAB

When you have written the play,
England may wish to examine the evidence.

Scene III. The Rose Theatre

The actors rehearse. MARLOWE directs a KING bearing a vast ancestral book. NED operates a painted mechanical sun.

ACTOR AS KING

I am the heir of David!

MARLOWE

Louder.

ACTOR AS KING

I AM THE HEIR OF DAVID!

MARLOWE

Now the scribe.

ACTOR AS SCRIBE

By what record, sire?

ACTOR AS KING

The record of my fathers!

ACTOR AS SCRIBE

Then let us read it.

ACTOR AS KING

I AM YOUR KING!

ALI enters.

ALI

Terrible.

MARLOWE

They are improving.

ALI

The king possesses every instrument
Of outward authority. The scribe owns
Only his question. Ask it calmly.

ACTOR AS SCRIBE

By what record, sire?

The king hesitates.

ACTOR AS KING

The record of my fathers.

ACTOR AS SCRIBE

Then let us read it.

MARLOWE

There. That's worth admission.

YUSUF

Yeah, fair enough. That's decent.

YUSUF and BILAL stand at the entrance.

MARLOWE

Who admitted the theological opposition?

YUSUF

Bruv, the door was open.

ALI

What brings you here?

YUSUF

Someone's printing leaflets
telling everyone to kick off here on Saturday.
We didn't write them.

He gives ALI the pamphlet.

ALI

"The theater is the house of falsehood.
Let every faithful Englishman assemble
To cast down the idols of Tudor kingship."

MARLOWE

An impressive advertisement.

YUSUF

You showing Sulayman himself onstage?

ALI

No.

YUSUF

Good. The prophets aren't actors.

ALI

Our play concerns a king who claims descent.

YUSUF

And the scribe asks for evidence?

ALI

You heard the scene.

YUSUF

Then I might buy a ticket.

NED examines the sheet against the light.

NED

I know this mark.
The royal mill made a defective paper batch.
Master Vane's office took the whole supply.

VANE enters from the rear.

VANE

Master Shakespear. Her Majesty will attend
On Saturday. I trust the history
Will preserve the dignity of her father's covenant.

ALI

I shall preserve what the records support.

VANE

The Crown is the custodian of its records.

ALI

Then it is fortunate to have copies abroad.

VANE sees NED holding the sheet.

VANE

You are an apprentice?
Take care that curiosity does not exceed your station.

He leaves.

MARLOWE

He threatens like a man
Who has practiced upon servants.

ALI

Lock the doors tonight.

ACT III: THE PRICE OF A WORD

Scene I. The first performance

Saturday. The Rose Theatre is full. The queen occupies the royal gallery, with NAFISA and ZAYNAB nearby. VANE stands behind her. Catholics, Muslims, merchants, sailors, and visiting scholars are among the spectators.

On the stage a HERALD announces the KING, who bears a book nearly as large as himself.

HERALD IN THE PLAY

All rise before the king whose fathers ruled
Before the hills of England knew their names.
He bears the seal of David on his hand,
The sword of royal justice at his side.
Let every tongue confess his ancient right.

KING IN THE PLAY

Behold my lineage, copied from the days
When prophets walked and kings were taught by God.
Here stand the names of all that went before,
A thousand years enclosed within these leaves.
The world shall read and know me for its heir.

A SCRIBE enters.

SCRIBE

Your Majesty, a question.

KING

Who art thou?

SCRIBE

The servant charged to read the book aloud.

KING

Then read.

SCRIBE

I find a passage here

Whose years exceed the names that occupy them.

KING

What dost thou mean?

SCRIBE

Three centuries are passed
Between two fathers written side by side.
How shall I tell the people who they were?

KING

Thou shalt declare them noble.

SCRIBE

By what proof?

KING

The book is mine.

SCRIBE

Then shall the book be true
Because its owner sits upon a throne?

The audience murmurs. ELIZABETH leans forward.

KING

My ancestors commanded men and lands.

SCRIBE

And who commands the truth their children claim?

KING

I am the king.

SCRIBE

Then govern justly, sire.
The book shall speak according to its ink.

Some applaud. Others hiss. VANE bends toward the queen.

VANE

This is a dangerous deviation
From the approved text.

ELIZABETH

I read the approved text.
It was much less interesting.

Onstage the KING closes the book.

KING

If blood be questioned, what remains to me?

SCRIBE

The living men whose hunger meets thy gate.
The widow whom thy judgment may defend.
The stranger who must trust thy written word.
The little child who bears thy kingdom's name
And asks what justice means when fathers die.

The queen sits motionless. Suddenly there is a cry outside.

VOICE

Idolatry!

A stone flies into the yard. Three masked men force their way through the entrance. One throws an earthen vessel of oil against the timber.

MARLOWE

Fire!

Flames rise. The audience surges. Guards shield the queen. A second vessel breaks against the gallery.

ALI

Open the eastern doors!
Keep the stairway clear!

SISTER JOAN falls on the gallery stairs. YUSUF, watching from the entrance, climbs over a bench.

YUSUF

Oi! Leave the woman! Help her up!

He pulls JOAN upright.

JOAN

There are children under the gallery!

YUSUF

Bilal! That gate!

BILAL forces the bolt with an iron bar. Near the stage NED attempts to save a chest of manuscript proofs.

ALI

Ned! Leave the papers!

NED

The copies, master!

ALI

Leave them!

NED reaches again. A beam collapses. ALI is knocked backward. MARLOWE catches him.

MARLOWE

Ali! The roof!

The queen has reached the exit. She turns.

ELIZABETH

Where is the playwright?

ALI emerges, supported by MARLOWE. Behind them the roof caves in.

Darkness.

Scene II. The council at Greenwich

Night. Rain strikes the palace windows. ALI's hand is bandaged. NED's body has been found among the ruins.

VANE

The evidence is plain.
The Salafist movement intended violence,
Distributed incendiary proclamations,
And assembled at the theater.

NAFISA

Who has been identified among the attackers?

VANE

Several men were masked.

NAFISA

Then how were they identified?

VANE

Their proclamations establish allegiance.

ZAYNAB

The proclamations without a printer's name?

VANE

English security is a matter
For the English crown.

ZAYNAB

Then let the crown investigate carefully.

ELIZABETH

Enough.

Silence.

How many dead?

VANE

Six confirmed.

ELIZABETH

The apprentice?

ALI

Edward Finch, Majesty. Seventeen.
He supported his mother in Southwark.

ELIZABETH

The Crown shall provide for her.

VANE

A proclamation is prepared.
It suspends unauthorized religious assemblies,
Orders the seizure of seditious publications,
And permits detention of their authors.

NAFISA

Before trial?

VANE

For the security of the kingdom.

NAFISA

The Republic learned through insurrection
That exceptional authority requires
A closer examination of its causes.

VANE

Your House of Transmission
Would debate the fire until London burned.

NAFISA

It would ask who started it.

VANE

Yusuf al-Holloway is in custody.

ALI

He saved a woman from the flames.

VANE

He was present.

ALI

So was I.

VANE

You were upon the royal stage.

ALI

He was in the burning gallery.

ELIZABETH

Where is the woman?

VANE

A Catholic nurse.
Sister Joan of Islington.

ELIZABETH

Bring her before the inquest.

VANE

Elements of the Catholic League
May be assisting Salafist agitation.

ELIZABETH

Then investigate the League as well.
A pamphlet whose printer has not been identified
Shall condemn no English subject.

She lays the proclamation aside.

I shall appoint an independent inquest.
Edward Finch's name shall be on its first page.

VANE

As Your Majesty commands.

ELIZABETH

Master Shakespear.
What became of the play?

ALI

It burned, Majesty.

ELIZABETH

The manuscript?

ALI

The manuscript Ned died attempting to save.

The queen is silent.

ELIZABETH

I have lost a play
And gained a debt to a dead child.

ALI

He believed words were worth saving.

ELIZABETH

And do you?

ALI

I believe we have yet to learn
Which words caused his death.

Scene III. The charred stage

Morning. The ruins of the Rose Theatre stand above the Thames. Actors collect burnt masks. The mechanical sun has split in two.

MARLOWE

There went three years of costumes.

ALI

And six lives.

MARLOWE

Yes.

He lifts the broken sun.

I wrote my first play in a room
That smelled of wet timber and stale ale.
I imagined theater a refuge
From the stupidity of governors.
Then I discovered that governors enjoy plays
Provided they may alter the endings.

ALI

You have spent ten years mocking kings.

MARLOWE

They keep producing material.

ALI

The queen wishes me to invent a language
That will bind England to the world.
And I have written a question
That may imperil the entire covenant.

The Catholic armies will use it.
The royalists will suppress it.
The men of Islington will say
It proves English Shi'ism a fraud.

MARLOWE

I find the question difficult enough
To require that we write the thing properly.

He turns the broken sun in his hands.

You are English, Ali. You are Egyptian.
Your father made gloves in Stratford.
Your grandfather translated royal lies.
Your queen follows a school her father invented
During the course of marrying a woman
He subsequently had executed.

If a simple man could have been made of you,
God has taken unusual pains to prevent it.

ALI

A fine tribute.

MARLOWE

I shall deliver a longer one
At your funeral if you insist on dying.

ALI looks over the wreckage.

ALI

Ned wanted the plays to travel to Cairo.
He had never been farther than Canterbury.

MARLOWE

Then put his name upon the title page.

ALI

There is no manuscript.

MARLOWE

You remember the words.
So do I.

He hands ALI the broken painted sun.

MARLOWE

Begin again.

ALI

A king may buy a parchment
And cause his name to be inscribed upon it.
A daughter may inherit the parchment
And mistake its binding for the truth.
A boy may die preserving the same,
Believing the words within are holy.

The boy deserved an honest page.

He places the sun upon the ground.

ALI

We shall call it The Book of Kings.

MARLOWE

And its final act?

ALI

I have yet to discover
Whether the queen intends to perform it.

ACT IV: THE COURT OF REASON

Scene I. The Tower of London

A prison chamber. YUSUF eats a piece of bread. He has a bruise under one eye. A GUARD opens the door.

GUARD

Stand for Her Majesty!

YUSUF

You're joking.

ELIZABETH enters with ALI, NAFISA, and a clerk. YUSUF rises and bows awkwardly.

YUSUF

Oh. Your Majesty.

ELIZABETH

Yusuf al-Holloway.
You stand accused of sedition,
Conspiracy, and the destruction
Of a royal theater.

YUSUF

Yeah, I heard.

ELIZABETH

You deny the charges?

YUSUF

Of course.

ELIZABETH

You preached against my father.

YUSUF

Your father's dead, respectfully.

ELIZABETH

His religion continues.

YUSUF

Well, that's the problem, innit?

The clerk looks appalled.

ELIZABETH

Explain yourself.

YUSUF

Your dad became a Muslim.
Alhamdulillah. Fine.
Then he told everyone he descended
from Nabi Dawud. I asked who verified it.

Your scholars told me to respect the king.
I asked again. They told me
to stop disturbing the peace.

Now I'm in the Tower.

ELIZABETH

You reject the theology of my kingdom?

YUSUF

I reject what nobody can evidence.

ELIZABETH

You believe kingship unlawful?

YUSUF

Depends what the king's doing.

ELIZABETH

And the House of Ali?

YUSUF

Allah honor them.
I'm having a go at English blokes
who use his name to collect extra taxes.

ELIZABETH

A perceptive distinction.

YUSUF

Thank you, Majesty.

ELIZABETH

You also dislike theater.

YUSUF

I'm not a fan of half of London.

ELIZABETH

Would you prohibit the things you dislike?

YUSUF

I'd rather people come to the mosque.

ELIZABETH

And if they prefer the theater?

YUSUF

I'll tell them why I think they're wrong.

ELIZABETH

And if they refuse to listen?

YUSUF

That's London.

The queen turns to ALI.

ELIZABETH

His manners are deplorable.
I begin to understand his popularity.

ALI

He is economical with language.

YUSUF

Bruv, I'll take that as a compliment.

ELIZABETH

You attended the play.

YUSUF

Only because someone's leaflets said
it was going to be some blasphemous festival.

ELIZABETH

And what did you find?

YUSUF

A geezer asking another geezer for evidence.

ELIZABETH

Did you approve?

YUSUF

Yeah.

ELIZABETH

Then perhaps the dramatic arts
Have a theological purpose after all.

YUSUF

Don't push it, Majesty.

The queen laughs. JOAN enters.

JOAN

Your Majesty, Yusuf saved my life.
I fell beside the gallery stairs.
He carried me to the eastern door.

I saw two men with the supposed colors
Of the Islington preachers.
Their coats were new, their cloth expensive.
One spoke with a southern gentleman's accent
And attempted to imitate the boys of Holloway.

YUSUF

What did he sound like?

JOAN

He shouted, "Down with royal idolaters!"
And then, "Come along, chaps."

YUSUF

"Come along, chaps"?
Nah, that's outrageous.
If you're gonna frame us,
at least hire someone from the area.

ELIZABETH

Sister Joan, you are Catholic.

JOAN

Yes, Majesty.

ELIZABETH

You understand how your testimony
May be received in a city frightened of Rome.

JOAN

I have lived here forty-seven years.
I buried Muslim children in epidemics
And tended soldiers wounded by Catholics.
My patients care whether I can stop bleeding.

The queen studies her.

ELIZABETH

The prisoners shall face an independent inquest.
Yusuf is released into its protection.

YUSUF

Can I go home?

ELIZABETH

When the clerk has finished the deposition.

YUSUF

How long's that?

NAFISA

I can advise on the procedure.

YUSUF

No offense, madam, but you're from Baghdad, yeah?
I've heard about your committees.

NAFISA

We have imprisoned fewer innocent men
Than your government has this week.

YUSUF

Fair enough.

He sits before the clerk.

YUSUF

Right. Write this down properly.

Scene II. The royal archive

Greenwich Palace. Manuscripts cover a table. SAFIYYA, ALI, MARLOWE, NAFISA, and ZAYNAB compare the original reports with the royal editions. Two royal clerks hover.

FIRST CLERK

These materials are restricted
To the Royal College of Antiquaries.

ZAYNAB

Some are copies of correspondence

Sent to the Fatimid court.

NAFISA

Others belong to the diplomatic record
Of the Republic.

SECOND CLERK

That cannot be correct.

NAFISA

You may challenge the record
Before the House of Transmission.

The clerks depart.

MARLOWE

A magnificent instrument of intimidation.

NAFISA

Another use for the constitution.

ALI

Here is Grandfather's report.

SAFIYYA

And the edition printed in 1535.

MARLOWE

The fourth paragraph is missing.
So is the conclusion.

ZAYNAB

Both appear in the Egyptian copy.

NAFISA

They also appear in Baghdad's record,
Entered before the English edition.

ALI

Then the alteration is established.

He reads from the original letter.

ALI

"To His Majesty, Henry, King of England:
Your Majesty commanded me to certify
That the Tudor line proceeds from David.
I have examined the manuscripts supplied.
Their accounts differ in material particulars.
Where they agree, they fail to establish

The genealogical connection proposed.

"I cannot certify what I cannot demonstrate."

He turns a page.

"Your Majesty further asked whether kingship
May be defended without ancestral connection.
To this I answer: the justice of a ruler
Must be established by his conduct.
Ancient blood cannot relieve his subjects
Of the duty to examine his rule."

Silence.

SAFIYYA

That was the argument your grandfather
Wished Henry to publish.

NAFISA

A curious foundation for a school
Calling itself Kingship and Reason.

ZAYNAB

The school may need its second principle.

MARLOWE opens a separate ledger.

MARLOWE

Now here is something.
Four hundred sheets of defective royal paper,
Delivered to the Keeper of the Press.
The same mark appears on the broadsheets.

And a payment to John Pritchard,
Formerly of the queen's guard,
For "special services in the management
Of public assemblies."

ALI

Does it carry a seal?

MARLOWE

Sir Edmund Vane's.

A voice comes from the door.

VANE

You have found him.

VANE enters with two guards.

John Pritchard has confessed

To his involvement in the burning.
He implicates the Catholic League.

NAFISA

Has he given testimony before a magistrate?

VANE

He is being examined.

ALI

Under what circumstances?

VANE

The Crown has methods of inquiry.

He sees the manuscripts.

VANE

These papers belong to the Crown.

ZAYNAB

Some belong to Cairo.

NAFISA

And others to Baghdad.

VANE

You entered the archive
To undermine English sovereignty.

ALI

The queen commanded me
To examine her father's genealogy.

VANE

You were commissioned to write a history.

ALI

I have found one.

VANE

History is an affair of national security.

ALI

Then the nation is in greater danger
Than I imagined.

VANE

Your mother is a foreign subject.
Your profession exists by royal license.

Yet you would imperil the kingdom
Which permits you to exercise it.

SAFIYYA

I am an English widow, Sir Edmund.
My husband was born in Stratford.
My son was born there also.
We have lived by the laws of this land
Longer than you have held your office.

VANE

Madam, I meant no offense.

SAFIYYA

Then you have expressed yourself poorly.

VANE turns to ALI.

VANE

What do you intend with the material?

ALI

Present it to the queen.

VANE

And afterward?

ALI

That depends upon her answer.

The guards move toward the papers. NAFISA and ZAYNAB stand.

ZAYNAB

Seizure of the Fatimid sealed copies
Will be reported directly to Cairo.

NAFISA

The Republic makes the same representation.

VANE withdraws his guards.

VANE

You imagine this changes the realm.

ALI

I imagine the realm may have something
To say about what we discovered.

VANE leaves.

MARLOWE

The Lord Keeper dislikes criticism.

SAFIYYA

Bring the documents to the queen.
And bring the ledger.

Scene III. Elizabeth's private chamber

Night. A Qur'an rests on a stand. A portrait of HENRY bears the motto AHL AL-MULK WA'L-'AQL. ALI enters carrying the original report.

ELIZABETH

Have you found your ending?

ALI

I have found the beginning.

He lays down the documents.

ALI

My grandfather's report.
The copies in Cairo and Baghdad.
The English edition with passages removed.

The Davidic line was never established.

ELIZABETH

So I see.

ALI

Did you know?

ELIZABETH

I suspected. Since I was a girl.

She closes the report.

My father desired a dynasty
That neither Rome nor Cairo might command.
He read the histories of kings
And found in David an example
Of sovereignty beneath one God.

He believed descent would persuade our nobles
That their new religion belonged
To the oldest royal order in the earth.

ALI

Did he believe the evidence?

ELIZABETH

My father had a rare ability
To believe whatever his necessities required.

She looks toward the portrait.

Yet in his later years I saw him pray.
I heard him struggle with Arabic.
I heard him weep upon the night
He learned that Anne, my mother,
Had gone to her death by his command.

ALI

Did he repent?

ELIZABETH

He asked forgiveness.
I leave the judgment to God.

Silence.

ALI

And you inherited his covenant.

ELIZABETH

I inherited his enemies.

My sister Mary tried to return England to Rome.
The armies sent in her name burned mosques,
Executed scholars, and forced men to kneel
Before the cross with swords at their necks.

When I became queen, I buried men
Who had fought beside her, and men
Who had fought against her.
Since then I have governed a country
Whose enemies insist it is a passing error.

ALI

You kept the genealogy.

ELIZABETH

I kept a kingdom.

ALI

Why commission the history?

ELIZABETH

My council is full of men taught
That pleasing me is the beginning of wisdom.
I wished to know what a poet would find
When permitted to read.

ALI

Then you have received your answer.

ELIZABETH

And lost six subjects before hearing it.

ALI places the printer's ledger beside the report.

ALI

The pamphlets printed in Islington
Used paper delivered to Sir Edmund Vane.
He paid a former guard for the management
Of public assemblies.

ELIZABETH reads. She rings a bell.

ELIZABETH

Bring Sir Edmund. Instruct the Tower
To deliver John Pritchard alive
To my own magistrates.

The guard departs.

ELIZABETH

Tell me what should be done with the book.

ALI

Publish it.

ELIZABETH

And the dynasty?

ALI

Let it answer the question
Your father inscribed on its seal.

ELIZABETH

Reason?

ALI

Yes.

ELIZABETH

Would you have me announce
That I am a queen without ancestry?

ALI

Your father was Henry Tudor.
His father was Henry Tudor.
Beyond them are generations
Written in English records.
You need not be David's daughter
To be England's queen.

The door opens. VANE enters.

VANE

Your Majesty summoned me.

ELIZABETH

Explain the payments to Pritchard
And the paper delivered to your office.

VANE

They concerned dangerous religious assemblies.

ELIZABETH

You manufactured the pamphlets.

VANE is silent.

Answer me.

VANE

I authorized their publication.

ELIZABETH

And their circulation at Islington?

VANE

We hoped to identify those most willing
To take action against the Crown.

ELIZABETH

You summoned them to the theater.
You employed Pritchard.

VANE

To supervise a disturbance
At the outer gates. A small fire,
Sufficient to justify intervention.

ELIZABETH

Six people died.

VANE

The fire exceeded its intended scale.

ELIZABETH

Edward Finch was seventeen.

VANE

I regret the losses.

ELIZABETH

You furnished our enemies
With the crimes you wished to discover.

VANE

I furnished the Crown an opportunity
To restore control of public discourse.

He turns toward ALI.

The poet teaches the people to ask
For evidence of the sovereign's descent.
Next they shall demand evidence
Of law, treasury, army, and succession.
What government survives a nation
Persuaded to question everything?

ALI

One that can answer.

VANE

Your father understood kingship.
Men require sacred origins
Before enduring mortal governors.

ELIZABETH

And you have killed mortal men
To preserve my sacred origin.

VANE

I sought to preserve your throne.

ELIZABETH

You burned its theater.

She calls the guard.

Sir Edmund Vane is relieved of his office.
Arrest him. Preserve every paper concerning
The theater, the pamphlets, and Pritchard.

VANE

When the Catholics next land

Upon our shores, your philosophers
Will have no remedy for their swords.

ELIZABETH

Then we shall require better swordsmen
Than we have philosophers.

VANE is taken away.

ELIZABETH

Master Shakespear, you have placed me
In a very difficult position.

ALI

Yes.

ELIZABETH

I begin to see why kings
Are reluctant to employ writers.

Tomorrow come before the council.
Bring your mother and the ambassadors.
Bring the fellow from Islington
Who is so concerned with receipts.

ALI

And the play?

ELIZABETH

Finish it.

ALI

What ending does Your Majesty desire?

ELIZABETH

I shall decide tomorrow.

ACT V: THE KINGDOM OF WORDS

Scene I. The court assembled

St Paul's Churchyard. A temporary stage has been built from salvaged timber. The crowd includes English merchants, Egyptian sailors, scholars, Catholic families, and petitioners from North London. The queen enters with her council, ALI, SAFIYYA, NAFISA, ZAYNAB, and SISTER JOAN.

HERALD

Hear the judgment of Elizabeth,
Daughter of Henry, Queen of England.

ELIZABETH

My father Henry received Islam
And made his kingdom answer to one God.
He established the People of Kingship and Reason.
He honored Ali and the household of the Prophet.
He declared his crown descended
From the ancient kings of David's line.

I ordered an examination
Of the documents founding that claim.

The examination produced a report.
The descent cannot be established
Upon the evidence presently known.

The crowd murmurs. LORD MORLEY rises.

MORLEY

Majesty, I protest.
The descent has been acknowledged
For three generations and inscribed on our seals.
Our scholars have sworn to its authenticity.

ELIZABETH

The surviving reports disclose
That my father's own translator
Found the evidence inadequate.
The objections disappeared

From the circulated royal editions.

SAFIYYA comes forward and places the original manuscript on the table.

SAFIYYA

My father Yusuf al-Misri
Was engaged to examine the chronicles.
He found the connection unproved.
His letter was altered in publication.
The copies surviving in Cairo and Baghdad
Establish which passages disappeared.

MORLEY

Are we to overturn a constitution
Upon a translator's daughter's word?

SAFIYYA

Upon the manuscript, my lord.
You are welcome to read it.

Laughter.

ELIZABETH

The complete report shall be published.
No English subject shall be compelled
To affirm the alleged Davidic descent
As an article of religious faith.

The claim shall be treated as a tradition
Subject to the ordinary examination of history.

MORLEY

You dissolve the foundation of your throne!

ELIZABETH

I have removed a doubtful proposition
From the articles by which men serve God.

MORLEY

What becomes of the People of Kingship and Reason?

ELIZABETH

They shall have occasion to employ reason.

Laughter grows through the crowd.

MORLEY

Your royal descent remains sacred!

ELIZABETH

You may defend the claim in writing.

I expect references.

NAFISA

Our republic has considerable experience
With public hearings.

ELIZABETH

It shall provide examples of procedure.
A great shura of the boroughs, shires,
And learned councils will examine
The confirmation of royal succession.
Parliament shall retain its present powers
Until the new settlement is drafted.

MORLEY

Such an assembly will argue forever!

NAFISA

I shall submit a memorandum.

ELIZABETH

I feared you might.

YUSUF raises his hand.

YUSUF

Majesty. So we can question the lineage now?

ELIZABETH

Yes.

YUSUF

Publicly?

ELIZABETH

Yes.

YUSUF

Without getting chucked in the Tower?

ELIZABETH

Provided you obey the ordinary peace
Of the kingdom.

YUSUF

That's calm.

He sits, then stands again.

What about the taxes?

ELIZABETH

What about them?

YUSUF

If we're having a shura,
can the boroughs bring up the bread levy?

ELIZABETH

They may petition.

YUSUF

And the drains?

ELIZABETH

The drains?

YUSUF

Holloway. They're disgusting.
You can smell them halfway to Finsbury.

ELIZABETH

The city surveyors shall report.

YUSUF

With a budget?

The queen pauses.

ELIZABETH

Public accountability
May prove more expensive than anticipated.

Even MORLEY laughs.

YUSUF

Safe, Majesty.

ELIZABETH

I presume that signifies agreement.

ALI

In North London it is among
The highest forms of approval.

Scene II. The queen's commission

That afternoon, the temporary stage stands empty. The first proof sheets of The Book of Kings lie upon a table.

ELIZABETH

You have rewritten the history.

ALI

Yes.

ELIZABETH

And my father?

ALI

He appears throughout.

ELIZABETH

You have made him ridiculous?

ALI

On several occasions.

ELIZABETH

And admirable?

ALI

On others.

ELIZABETH

Then perhaps you understood him.

She lifts the first page.

ELIZABETH

The Book of Kings.
An unusual title for a history
Whose royal genealogy has dissolved.

ALI

The book contains many kings.
Some deserve remembrance.

ELIZABETH

And the language?

ALI

English. My mother has corrected

The Arabic. Lady Zaynab's translators
Prepared the Alexandrian edition.
The Republic has requested the right
To reproduce the book in Baghdad.

NAFISA

With commentary.

ELIZABETH

Naturally.

ZAYNAB

The Fatimid court proposes reciprocal printing.
English plays may be published in our ports.
Egyptian works may be printed in England.
The translators shall be named.

ELIZABETH

And the royal license?

ZAYNAB

The agreement gives each court
The right to circulate its own editions.

NAFISA

The Republic requires public criticism.

MARLOWE

A perilous condition for a playwright.

ELIZABETH

What of the Buyids?

ZAYNAB

They have offered to finance the arrangement.

NAFISA

And also a rival publishing enterprise
In case this one fails.

ELIZABETH

I should have been astonished otherwise.

She faces the Thames.

ELIZABETH

I imagined a thousand English stages
Standing in the cities of the earth.
I imagined children beyond our shores

Learning the histories of our kings,
The songs we taught our own children,
The language in which we remembered England.

ALI

And in Cairo they shall alter our histories.
In Baghdad they shall argue with them.
In Persia the Buyids may sponsor a poet
Who makes sport of your reign.

ELIZABETH

I should like to meet him.

MARLOWE

You already have one.

The queen smiles.

ELIZABETH

And in England?

ALI

We shall continue writing.

ELIZABETH

Then write well.

She gives the manuscript to ALI.

Put the apprentice's name inside the book.

ALI

It is there.

She reads the dedication.

ELIZABETH

"In memory of Edward Finch,
apprentice printer, who died
in the fire at the Rose Theatre."

His mother has the Crown's pension.

ALI

She requests that the inquest continue.

ELIZABETH

It shall.

She hands the pages to ZAYNAB.

Send it to Cairo. And to Baghdad.

NAFISA

The House of Transmission
Will wish to examine its contents.

ELIZABETH

For how long?

NAFISA

I cannot say.

ELIZABETH

Then print enough copies
To occupy them through the winter.

Scene III. The first printing

Several months later. Shakespear's printing house. Copies of The Book of Kings are stacked beside Arabic and Italian editions. SAFIYYA corrects a translation. MARLOWE works on a manuscript.

MARLOWE

The queen has established her council
To reform succession.

ALI

I have heard.

MARLOWE

Lord Morley spoke against it.

ALI

For how long?

MARLOWE

Seven hours.

ALI

He may be qualified for Baghdad.

MARLOWE

The House of Transmission
Has received the first English play.

ALI

And?

MARLOWE

A scholar from Kufa objects
To the treatment of King David.

ALI

Does King David appear?

MARLOWE

No.

ALI

Then the objection concerns his absence.

SAFIYYA

Perhaps the next play should concern
The activities of men when prophets are absent.

ALI

That is the history of the world, Mother.

SAFIYYA

Then you have sufficient material.

A knock. YUSUF enters with a manuscript.

YUSUF

Salaam, people.

SAFIYYA

Wa alaykum al-salam.

ALI

Have you come to see the new edition?

YUSUF

Yeah, yeah. I've got something.

He puts a great bundle on the table.

ALI

What is it?

YUSUF

A book.

MARLOWE

By whom?

YUSUF

Me.

MARLOWE

Heaven preserve us.

ALI

What is it called?

YUSUF

A Proper Examination of the English Royal
Covenant, with Particular Attention
to the Extraordinary Claims of Henry Tudor,
His Successors, and Several Persons
Who Ought to Know Better.*

ALI

How many pages?

YUSUF

A hundred and nine.

MARLOWE

The Republic shall be delighted.

YUSUF

I need a printer.
And someone to look over the writing.

ALI

You want me to edit it?

YUSUF

Yeah. You lot are meant to be good with words.

ALI

Read your preface.

YUSUF opens the manuscript.

YUSUF

"To the honorable people of England,
and especially those gentlemen
whose family trees have become
a matter of public expenditure..."

MARLOWE laughs.

YUSUF

What?

ALI

Continue.

YUSUF

"...the author submits the following questions,
with respect to the evidence,
and with acknowledgment of the difficulties
that arise when men mistake a crown
for a certificate of prophethood."

SAFIYYA

Ali, you should print it.

ALI

I intend to.

MARLOWE

The queen will be displeased.

ALI

She commissioned a literature.

MARLOWE

And here is its first rebellion.

YUSUF

So are you gonna help me or what?

ALI

Sit down.

YUSUF sits beside the press.

ALI

We shall begin with the title.

YUSUF

What's wrong with the title?

ALI

Nothing, if you intend to print it
Upon the sail of a ship.

YUSUF

Man's taking the piss already.

SAFIYYA

He is an English writer, Yusuf.
They regard it as a professional obligation.

ALI takes his pen.

EPILOGUE: ALEXANDRIA

A small theater overlooking the harbor. The year is 1008 AH. Two Egyptian boys rehearse The Book of Kings. One wears a crown made from folded English paper.

FIRST BOY

I am the king!

SECOND BOY

By what right?

FIRST BOY

My father was the king!

SECOND BOY

And was he just?

FIRST BOY

I don't know.

SECOND BOY

Then how shall we know whether you are?

The first boy removes his crown.

FIRST BOY

This is a stupid play.

SECOND BOY

It is English.

FIRST BOY

What does that mean?

SECOND BOY

My teacher says the English are a people
Who conquered their own language.

FIRST BOY

Where is England?

SECOND BOY

Beyond the western sea.

FIRST BOY

Is it a great empire?

The second boy considers.

SECOND BOY

They are trying to become one.

He takes the crown and puts it on his head.

SECOND BOY

Now I am the king.

FIRST BOY

By what right?

The second boy looks at the crown.

SECOND BOY

Ask me again.

Curtain.

Fictional alternate history. The political arrangements, genealogies, characters, and historical divergences belong to the imagined world of the play.