

The Ile of Dogges
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[Insert Pic dogges.jpg Here]

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“In 2004, Elizabeth Bear published a story about Christopher Marlowe on *Scifiction*: “This Tragic Glass”

http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/originals/originals_archive/bear/bear1.html). After Wiscon that year, we were sitting around a table in one of Madison’s more psychedelic delis, talking about Marlowe and the Elizabethan theatrical scene and, inevitably, the Master of Revels, Sir Edmund Tylney. Elizabeth’s state censor. And we imagined how frustrated he must have been by playwrights who persisted in writing things that had to be cut, rewritten, turned down flat. And we imagined his reaction to the great lost scandalous play of Jonson and Nashe, *The Ile of Dogges*. And this story was born.”

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THE LIGHT WOULD LAST LONG ENOUGH.

Sir Edmund Tylney, in pain and reeking from rotting teeth, stood before the sideboard and crumbled sugar into his sack, causing a sandy yellowish grit to settle at the bottom of the cup. He swirled the drink to sweeten it, then bore it back to his reading table where an unruly stack of quarto pages waited, slit along the folds with a pen-knife.

He set the cup on the table in the sunlight and drew up his stool, its short legs rasping over the rush mats as he squared it and sat. He reached left-handed for the wine, right-handed for the playscript, drawing both to him over the pegged tabletop. And then he riffled the sheets of Speilman’s cheapest laid with his nail.

Bending into the light, wincing as the sweetened wine ached across his teeth with every sip, he read.

He turned over the last leaf, part-covered in secretary’s script, as he drank the last gritty swallow in his cup, the square of sun spilling over the table-edge to spot the floor. Tylney drew out his own pen knife, cut a new point on a quill, and—on a fresh quarter-sheet—began to write the necessary document. The Jonson fellow was inexperienced, it was true. But Tom Nashe should have known better.

Tylney gulped another cup of sack before he set his seal to the denial, drinking fast, before his teeth began to hurt. He knew himself, without vanity, to be a clever man—intelligent, well-read. He had to be, to do his job as Master of Revels and censor for the queen, for the playmakers, too, were clever, and they cloaked

their satires under layers of witty language and misdirection. The better the playwright, the better the play, and the more careful Tylney had to be.

The Ile of Dogges was a good play. Lively, witty. Very clever, as one would expect from Tom Nashe and the newcomer Jonson. And Tylney's long-practiced and discerning eye saw the satire on every page, making mock of—among a host of other, lesser targets—Elizabeth, her Privy Council, and the Lord Chamberlain.

It could never be performed.

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RIGHTEOUS-IN-THE-CAUSE SAMSON:

Why is't named Ile of Dogges?

WITWORTH:

Because here are men like wild dogges. Haue they numbers, they will sauage a lyon: but if the lyon come vpon one by himselfe, he will grouel and showe his belye. And if the lyon but ask it, he will sauage his friends.

RIGHTEOUS-IN-THE-CAUSE SAMSON:

But is that not right? For surely a dogge should honour a lyon.

WITWORTH:

But on this island, even the lyon is a dogge. ¹

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It could never be performed, but it was. A few days later, despite the denial, Jonson and the Earl of Pembroke's Men staged *The Ile of Dogges* at the Swan. Within the day, Jonson and the principal actors were in chains at the Marshalsea, under gentle questioning by the Queen's own torturer, Topcliffe himself. The other playwright, Thomas Nashe, fled the city to elude arrest. And The Theatre, The Curtain, The Swan—all of London's great playhouses languished, performances forbidden.

The Ile of Dogges languished, likewise, in a pile on the corner of Tylney's desk, weighted by his pen-knife (between sharpenings). It lay face down, cup-ringed pages adorned with the scratch of more than one pen. The dull black oakgall ink had not yet begun to fade, nor the summer's heat to wane, when Tylney, predictably, was graced by a visit from Master Jonson.

Flea bites and shackle gall still reddened the playwright's thick wrists, counterpoint to the whitework of older scars across massive hands. Unfashionably short hair curled above his plain, pitted face. He topped six feet, Ben Jonson. He had been a soldier in the Low Countries.

He ducked to come through the doorway, but stood straight within, stepping to one side after he closed the door so that the wall was at his back. "You burned Tom's papers."

"He fled London. We must be sure of the play, all its copies."

"All of them?" For all his rough bravado, Jonson's youth showed in how easily he revealed surprise. "'Tis but a play."

"Master Jonson," Tylney said, steeping his hands before him, "it mocks the Queen. More than that, it might encourage others to mock the Queen. 'Tis sedition."

Recovering himself, Jonson snorted. He paced, short quick steps, and turned, and paced back again. "And the spies Parrot and Poley as were jailed in with me? Thought you I'd aught to tell them?"

"No spies of mine," Tylney said. "Perhaps Topcliffe's. Mayhap he thought you had somewhat of interest to him to impart. No Popist sympathies, Master Jonson? No Scottish loyalties?"

Jonson stopped at the furthest swing of his line and stared at the coffered paneling. That wandering puddle of sun warmed his boots this time. He reached out, laid four blunt fingertips and a thumb on the wall—his hand bridged between them—and dropped his head so his arm hid the most of his face. His other hand, Tylney noticed, brushed the surface of the sideboard and left something behind, half-concealed beside the inkpot. "No point in pleading for the return of the manuscript, I take it?"

"Destroyed," Tylney said, without letting his eyes drop to the pages on his desk. And, as if that were all the restraint he could ask of himself, the question burst out of him: "Why do it, Master Jonson? Why *write* it?"

Jonson shrugged one massive shoulder. "Because it is a good play."

Useless to ask for sense from a poet. One might as well converse with a tabby cat. Tylney lifted the bell, on the other corner of his desk from the play that ought already to be destroyed, and rang it, a summons to his clerk. "Go home, Master Jonson."

"You've not seen the last of me, Sir Edmund," Jonson said, as the door swung open—not a threat, just a fact.

It wasn't the usual clerk, but a tall soft-bellied fellow with wavy black hair, sweet-breathed, with fine white teeth.

"No," Tylney said. He waited until the click of the latch before he added, "I don't imagine I have."

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ANGELL:

Hast sheared the sheep, Groat?

GROAT:

Aye, though their fleece be but siluer.

he handeth Angell a purse

ANGELL:

Then thou must be Iason and find the golden fleece: or mayhap needs merely shear a little closer to the skin.

GROAT:

Will not the sheep grow cold, without their wool?

ANGELL:

They can grow more. And, loyal Groat, wouldst prefer thy sheep grow cold, or thy master grow hot?

GROAT:

The sheep may shiuer for all I care.

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Tylney waited until Jonson's footsteps retreated into silence, then waited a little more. When he was certain neither the clerk nor the playmaker were returning, he came around his table on the balls of his feet and scooped up the clinking pouch that Jonson had left behind. He bounced it on his hand, a professional gesture, and frowned at its weight. Heavy.

He replaced it where Jonson had laid it, and went to chip sugar from the loaf and mix himself another cup of sack, to drink while he re-read the play. He read

faster this time, standing up where the light was better, the cup resting on the sideboard by the inkpot and Jonson's bribe. He shuffled each leaf to the back as he finished. When he was done, so was the sack.

He weighed the playscript in his hand, frowning at it, sucking his aching teeth.

It was August. There was no fire on the grate.

He dropped the playscript on the sideboard, weighted it with the bribe, locked the door behind him, and went to tell the clerk—the cousin, he said, of the usual boy, who was abed with an ague—that he could go.

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WITWORTH:

That's Moll Tuppence. They call her Queene of Dogges.

RIGHTEOUS-IN-THE-CAUSE SAMSON:

For why?

WITWORTH:

For that if a man says aught about her which he ought not, she sets her cures to make him say naught in sooth.

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Sir Edmund Tylney lay awake in the night. His teeth pained him, and if he'd any sense, he'd have had them pulled that winter. No sense, he thought. No more sense than a tabby cat. Or a poet. And he lay abed and couldn't sleep, haunted by the image of the papers on the sideboard, weighted under Jonson's pouch. He should have burned them that afternoon.

He would go and burn them now. Perhaps read them one more time, just to be certain there was no salvaging this play. Sometimes he would make suggestions, corrections, find ways—through cuts or additions—that a play could be made safe for performance. Sometimes the playwrights acquiesced, and the play was saved.

Though Jonson was a newcomer, Tylney knew already that he did not take kindly to editing. But it was a good play.

Perhaps there was a chance.

Tylney roused himself and paced in the night, in his slippers and shirt, and

found himself with candle in hand at the door of his office again. He unlocked it—the tumblers moving silently in the well-oiled catch—and pushed it before him without bothering to lift the candle or, in fact, look up from freeing key from lock.

He knew where everything should be.

The brilliant flash that blinded him came like lightning, like the spark of powder in the pan, and he shouted and threw a warding hand before his eyes, remembering even in his panic not to tip the candle. Someone cursed in a foreign tongue; a heavy hand closed on Tylney's wrist and dragged him into his office, shouldering the door shut behind before he could cry out again.

Whoever clutched him had a powerful grip. Was a big man, young, with soft uncalled hands. "Jonson," he gasped, still half-blinded by the silent lightning, pink spots swimming before his eyes. "You'll hang for this!"

"Sir Edmund," a gentle voice said over the rattle of metal, "I am sorry."

Too gentle to be Jonson, just as those hands, big as they were, were too soft for a soldier's. Not Jonson. The replacement clerk. Tylney shook his head side to side, trying to rattle the dots out of his vision. He blinked, and could almost see, his candle casting a dim glow around the office. If he looked through the edges of his sight, he could make out the lay of the room—and what was disarrayed. *The Ile of Dogges* had been taken from the sideboard, the drapes drawn close across the windows and weighted at the bottom with Jonson's bribe. Perhaps a quarter of the pages were turned.

"I'll shout and raise the house," Tylney said.

"You have already," the clerk said. He released Tylney's wrist once Tylney had steadied himself on the edge of the table, and turned back to the playscript.

"There's only one door out of this room." And Tylney had his back to it. He could hear people moving, a voice calling out, seeking the source of that cry.

"Sir Edmund, shield your eyes." The clerk raised something to his own eye, a flat piece of metal no bigger than a lockplate, and rather like a lockplate, with a round hole in the middle.

Tylney stepped forward instead and grabbed the clerk's arm. "What are you doing?"

The man paused, obviously on the verge of shoving Tylney to the floor, and stared at him. "Damn it to hell," he said. "All right, look. I'm trying to save this play."

“From the fires?”

“From oblivion,” he said. He dropped his arm and turned the plate so Tylney could see the back of it. His thumb passed over a couple of small nubs marked with red sigils, and Tylney gasped. As if through a *camera obscura*, the image of a page of *The Ile of Dogges* floated on a bit of glass imbedded in the back of the plate, as crisp and brightly lit as if by brilliant day. It wasn’t the page to which the play lay open. “My name’s Baldassare,” the clerk—the sorcerer—said. “I’m here to preserve this play. It was lost.”

“Jonson’s summoned demons,” Tylney whispered, as someone pounded on the office door. It rattled, and did not open. Baldassare must have claimed the keys when he dragged Tylney inside, and fastened the lock while Tylney was still bedazzled. The light of the candle would show under the door, though. The servants would know he was here.

It was his private office, and Tylney had one of only two keys. Someone would have to wake the steward for the other.

He could shout. But Baldassare could kill him before the household could break down the door. And the sorcerer was staring at him, one eyebrow lifted, as if to see what he would do.

Tylney held his tongue, and the door rattled once more before footsteps retreated.

“Just a historian,” Baldassare answered, when the silence had stretched a minute or two.

“*Historian?* But the play’s not three months old!”

Baldassare shook his head. “Where I come from, it’s far older. And it’s—” He hesitated, seeming to search for a word. “It’s *dead*. No one has ever read it, or seen it performed. Most people don’t even know it once existed.” He laid fingertips on the papers, caressing. “Let me take it. Let me give it life.”

“It’s sedition.” Tylney grasped the edge of the script, greatly daring, and pulled it from under Baldassare’s hand.

“It’s brilliant,” Baldassare said, and Tylney couldn’t argue, though he bundled the papers close to his chest. The sorcerer had been strangely gentle with him, as a younger man with an older. Perhaps he could gamble on that. Perhaps. It was his duty to protect the queen.

Baldassare continued, “None will know, no one shall read it, not until you and Elizabeth and Jonson and Nashe are long in your graves. It will do no harm. I swear

it.”

“A sorcerer’s word,” Tylney said. He stepped back, came up hard against the door. The keys weren’t in the lock. They must be in Baldassare’s hand.

“Would you have it lost forever? Truly?” Baldassare reached and Tylney crowded away. Into the corner, the last place he could retreat. “Sir Edmund!” someone shouted from the hall.

From outside the door, Tylney heard the jangle of keys, their rattle in the lock. “You’ll hang,” he said to Baldassare.

“Maybe,” Baldassare said, with a sudden grin that showed his perfect, white teeth. “But not today.” One lingering, regretful look at the papers crumpled to Tylney’s chest, and he dropped the keys on the floor, touched something on the wrist of the hand that held the metal plate, and vanished in a shimmer of air as Tylney gaped after him.

The door burst open, framing Tylney’s steward, John, against blackness.

Tylney flinched.

“Sir Edmund?” The man came forward, a candle in one hand, the keys in the other. “Are you well?”

“Well enough,” Tylney answered, forcing himself not to crane his neck after the vanished man. He could *claim* a demon had appeared in his work room, right enough. He could claim it, but who would believe?

He swallowed, and eased his grip on the play clutched to his chest. “I dropped the keys.”

The steward frowned doubtfully. “You cried out, milord.”

“I stumbled only,” Tylney said. “I feared for the candle. But all is well.” He laid the playscript on the table and smoothed the pages as his steward squatted to retrieve the fallen keys. “I thank you your concern.”

The keys were cool and heavy, and clinked against each other like debased coins when the steward handed them over. Tylney laid them on the table beside the candle and the play. He lifted the coin purse from the window ledge, flicked the drapes back, and weighted the pages with the money once more before throwing wide the shutters, heedless of the night air. It was a still summer night, the stink of London rising from the gutters, but a draft could always surprise you, and he didn’t feel like chasing paper into corners.

The candle barely flickered. “Sir Edmund?”

“That will be all, John. Thank you.”

Silently, the steward withdrew, taking his candle and his own keys with him. He left the door yawning open on darkness. Tylney stood at his table for a moment, watching the empty space.

He and John had the only keys. Baldassare had come and gone like a devil stepping back and forth from Hell. Without the stink of brimstone, though. Perhaps more like an angel. Or memory, which could walk through every room in Tylney’s house, through every playhouse in London, and leave no sign.

Tylney bent on creaking knees and laid kindling on the hearth. He stood, and looked at the playscript, one-quarter of the pages turned where it rested on the edge of his writing table, the other three-fourths crumpled and crudely smoothed. He turned another page, read a line in Jonson’s hand, and one in Nashe’s. His lips stretched over his aching teeth, and he chuckled into his beard.

He laid the pages down. No more sense than a tabby cat. It was late for making a fire. He could burn the play in the morning. Before he returned Jonson’s bribe. He’d lock the door behind him, so no one could come in or out. There were only two sets of keys.

Sir Edmund Tylney blew the candle out, and trudged upstairs through the customary dark.

In the morning, he’d see to the burning.

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¹ All quotations are from the Poet Emeritus Series edition of *The Ile of Dogges*, edited by Anthony Baldassare (Las Vegas, NV: University of Nevada Press, 2206).