

SYNOPSIS



Act I

The throne room. Under the leadership of Leicester, the Queen's armies have reported a military victory that will finally subdue Scotland. The Duke of Norfolk is secretly envious of Leicester's rising fortunes. Hailed by all, Queen Elizabeth is delighted at Leicester's return, for she is secretly in love with him. She rewards Leicester, then receives the Scottish hostages. Among them, Leicester is astonished to discover Matilde, the wife he has wedded secretly, now in male attire together with her brother Enrico. When the Queen and her courtiers retire, Leicester remains alone with Matilde, who is the daughter of Mary, Queen of Scots, and therefore banished from England with her brother. Matilde explains that she has rushed to her husband's side because of insistent rumours that Elizabeth is in love with him, and Enrico came with her to protect her.

The royal apartments. Leicester confides in Norfolk, telling him how he met Matilde in a humble shepherd's dwelling; when he learned that the shepherd was a Scottish nobleman in disguise, he asked for the girl's hand in marriage and the old man revealed the true identity of the supposed shepherdess and her brother. Leicester, however, went ahead with his plans to marry the girl. When Norfolk is left alone he is overjoyed at having been entrusted with these secrets; he hates Leicester and envies his undeserved good luck. Seeing the Queen approaching, he tells her of Leicester's secret marriage with the daughter of Mary Stuart. Feeling herself betrayed in love and also in loyalty by her subject, Elizabeth decides to condemn her beloved Leicester to death; Norfolk exults. The Queen orders Guglielmo, the

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captain of the guards, to summon Leicester before her and to hold the royal guard ready. The general enters together with all the courtiers, including the Scottish noblemen with Matilde and Enrico; the Queen easily spots her rival. She turns to Leicester, announcing that the time has come to reward him for his loyalty, then offers to Leicester the crown and sceptre, saying that he will be her husband and England's King. To everyone's amazement Leicester refuses the Queen's offer. The infuriated Queen drags Matilde into the middle of the room, accuses the general of treason, and consigns them to the guards.

Act II

Rooms. Elizabeth orders Guglielmo to bring in first Matilde, then Leicester. The Queen reminds her rival that the scaffold is ready, but she is disposed to grant pardon to all three, if Matilde consents to write a letter renouncing all claims upon Leicester's heart. Matilde begs in vain to be the sole victim of Elizabeth's vengeance and is obliged to write the letter. When Leicester comes on, Elizabeth urges him to repent and follow Matilde's example. When Leicester reads the letter he tears it up, declaring that death would be preferable. Infuriated, the Queen threatens both of them with death and has them locked up in prison again. Guglielmo announces that Norfolk begs audience of the Queen, but Elizabeth sees clearly Norfolk's baseness: the next day he will be banished from her kingdom. The captain of the guard is overjoyed at this, as he has long understood Norfolk's true character.

An atrium beside the prison. The townsfolk and the soldiers mourn the unhappy fate of Leicester. Jealous of his enemy's widespread popularity, and embittered by the thought of his impending exile, Norfolk harangues the mob, convincing them to force the gates of the prison to free the general; but secretly harbours a plan for vengeance.

Inside a spacious prison. Leicester is bemoaning his fate. Norfolk comes in, and succeeds in persuading him that far from having betrayed him to Elizabeth, he has begged her to pardon him. He orders two sappers to break down the door of the cell where Matilde and Enrico are imprisoned. Leicester is grateful for these signs of friendship, and Norfolk tells him that soon the people will come and set him free. The



general, however, refuses: his loyalty to the throne will not permit him to disobey the Queen's edicts. Norfolk hides, seeing that the Queen herself is coming to talk to the prisoner; Matilde and Enrico are also peering out of their cell. Elizabeth explains to Leicester that as Queen she condemns him, as a woman her desire is to help him to escape. But Leicester declares that he has no desire to be a rebel to the throne; he rather asks the Queen to be merciful towards his wife and brother-in-law. Elizabeth, however, declares that she cannot spare them, because Norfolk publicly revealed their identity. Leicester learns the true nature of his friend, and tells the Queen how Norfolk has incited the townspeople to revolt; seeing himself lost, Norfolk draws his sword intending to attack the Queen, but Enrico and Matilde rush out of their cell to stop him, and Leicester shields the Queen with his own body. The guards rush in to arrest Norfolk, to whom the Queen promises torture and death. She then pardons Leicester and the children of Mary Stuart. Unexpectedly the crowd bursts in, calling aloud for Leicester to be freed; the general himself quietens the mob, and all kneel before the Queen. Acclaimed by all, she decides quietly to banish for ever all worldly love from her heart and to dedicate herself to royal virtues.