

The origins of *The Invisible Exchange*

I first became aware of the story of Frances Howard when I was working on early C17th theatre. Contemporary events are often referred to in plays of the period. Aspects of Frances Howard's extraordinary story is alluded to (albeit thinly disguised) in works by many playwrights of the period – perhaps most notably by Ben Jonson, Thomas Middleton and John Webster.

Frances Howard was the daughter of Lord Thomas Howard (Earl of Suffolk). In 1604, at the age of fourteen, she was married to Robert Devereux, 3rd Earl of Essex. The arranged marriage was intended as a political reconciliation between two immensely powerful families. But the marriage was a disaster. Although Frances's marriage to Essex was never consummated, he was intensely jealous of her popularity at court – the Venetian ambassador described her as 'the most beautiful woman in all Europe'. Essex insisted she leave London and live at Chartley Manor, his moated mansion house in Staffordshire, where Mary Queen of Scots had been held under house arrest immediately prior to her execution. She was there for much of the summer and early autumn of 1611.

On 25th September 1613, her marriage was annulled, and thus she became the first Englishwoman to successfully seek her own divorce – but in a deeply misogynist society she paid a terrible price for her fierce intelligence and independent spirit. Two years after marrying her second husband (Viscount Rochester, formerly Robert Carr) she was accused of murdering Sir Thomas Overbury, who had been imprisoned in the Tower of London on a charge of treason. No evidence was produced at her murder trial which would stand up in a modern law court, and she was not permitted to defend herself despite having to suffer a stream of vicious accusations which amounted to nothing more than malicious libels. The fact that she had met Doctor Simon Forman seemed enough to prove the case against her. The central argument against her was that she was a 'creature of the deed' – meaning that if she was capable of consulting a man who was reputedly a sorcerer and necromancer, and could dare to initiating her own divorce proceedings, then she must be capable of murder.

The story fascinated me for numerous reasons. Frances's trial revealed so much – not only about misogyny, but also about corruption at the heart of the Stuart court. I was intrigued by

the parallels with our so-called ‘modern’ times. Frances was treated as a femme fatale who was branded by her prosecutor as so evil that she wasn’t allowed to speak in her own defence at her trial. The murder of Sir Thomas Overbury resulted in the execution of four ‘bit-part players’ and the imprisonment Frances and Robert Carr (by then they had become Earl and Countess of Somerset). Frances had pleaded guilty to the charge of murder, though it seems highly likely that this was a kind of plea-bargaining because by then she and Robert Carr had a daughter, and they were allowed to live together in relative comfort in the Tower. That, in itself is very strange, for if they had been genuinely guilty of murder they would almost certainly have been executed. After seven years in the Tower, however, they were pardoned by King James, and released.

There is no doubt that Frances despised Overbury, who had constantly libelled her in the most vicious and public ways, but Overbury had a great many powerful enemies – including King James himself. Throughout the six months that Overbury spent in the Tower, he was regularly attended by the King’s own doctor, Dr. Theodore de Mayerne. And many of the salves and ‘medicines’ (such as quicksilver, i.e. mercury) that de Mayerne prescribed for Overbury are now known to be lethal. Whether de Mayerne deliberately poisoned Overbury, or his ‘treatment’ was misguided isn’t known

All of this intrigued me, although I had no idea how I would write a novel about it – until I came across rumours in contemporary pamphlets which referred to persistent rumours that Frances was seen in and around London during the period when Essex kept her under virtual house arrest at his mouldering manor house in Staffordshire. There is no evidence in the historical records that she was spirited out of Chartley, but for me it provoked ‘the big suppose’ that gave me starting point for the novel that became *The Invisible Exchange*. And after several false starts, including versions of the story told from different points of view. Matthew Edgworth is a fictional character, although the world he inhabits is thoroughly researched. In the novel he talks briefly about how much he learnt from going to the theatres from an early age. I didn’t consciously create him in the tradition of those Jacobean malcontents who breathe such wit and dark energy into several of the plays of the period – Edmund in *King Lear*, Bosola in *The Duchess of Mali*, Flamineo in *The White Devil* (both by John Webster), De Flores in Middleton and Rowley’s *The Changeling* – but that is what he became, a servant to Robert Carr (who is ennobled to become Viscount Rochester, and subsequently the Earl of Somerset). As Matthew puts it, “I’ve never had Carr’s looks but I’m

no fuckwit. If a smockfaced page could rise to favour, I too can make my way in the world, even if my scarred face will never decorate the pillows of the powerful... And in me he had a servant who was far more artful than himself.”

In early versions of the novel Matthew was a relatively minor character, but whenever I read extracts at writers groups, it was always those episodes narrated by Matthew which my fellow writers wanted to hear. And when I sought an appraisal of an early draft from The Literary Consultancy, Lesley McDowell was equally enthusiastic about those episodes that he narrated. “Matthew is a great character. He has a distinctive voice, he’s engaging and fascinating... He’s playing power games all over the place... His point of view is intriguing ...” So I set about writing the whole novel from Matthew’s point of view....

If you’re going to beat a man, no half measures. That was their mistake. They broke my left hand. As if that alone would crush my sinister, ill-omened nature. But they didn’t kill me. And they didn’t cut out my tongue – nor my balls come to that, though I can but dream of the time when I might have use for them again. And if a man with cracked ribs and crushed hand can be said to have his health, I have that too. Maybe even some of my wits, for I managed to make my escape from London and I’m writing this in what seems, at least for now, a place of sanctuary. Matthew Edgworth, who no longer has the use of his left hand, writing with his right. And right has never come easy.

Same with beatings, same with lies. The halfway house on any journey’s the place most fraught with danger. Half-truths, half-lies – they’re the ones that ambush you. So this is a whole truth. The truth that’s missing from the chronicles of these dark times...