

ABSTRACT

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The Unforgiven: Elizabeth, Essex, and the Countess of Nottingham

Two 19th century American women produced very similar and surprising poems about the final days of three pivotal figures in the popularized Elizabeth and Essex story. Lydia Howard Sigourney published “Queen Elizabeth and the Countess of Nottingham” in 1835, and Emily Dickinson wrote “Elizabeth Told Essex” almost 40 years later. The two poems are a matched set: both imagine dual scenes of judgment and forgiveness. Sigourney renders the 1603 deathbed confession of the Countess of Nottingham who, according to legend, failed to deliver a ring that would have guaranteed his pardon from Essex to the Queen. The outraged Queen offers no solace to the dying Countess but soon finds herself in front of the “Judge in Heaven,” pleading for the forgiveness she herself denied both the Countess and Essex. Dickinson’s short, unsentimental poem ends the same way: with Elizabeth facing the uncertain judgment of “Deity” upon her death.

Before analyzing these two little-known poems, this paper offers a hasty tour of the provenance and purposes of the famous but fictional ring story from its beginnings in the years after Essex’s execution through more than 200 years into the 19th century, and beyond. Especially interesting, for both these particular imaginings of the Essex story—and, more broadly, for the persistent proliferation and variation of the ring story across the years, genres and continents—are the tropes of passion, pride, and penitence. These poems read the Elizabeth and Essex story backwards from the imagined emotional and spiritual status of the Queen at her death; they epitomize the long literary tradition that has transformed Essex’s fall from political catastrophe into personal tragedy.

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Unmasking Essex Through Performance Secrets

With deepening historical scholarship on Shakespeare, and recognition by ‘the new social history’ that political critique in early modern England existed at a social depth far below the gentry, the discovery emerges of a politically *engagé* and risk-taking Shakespeare. Intimate with the public theaters’ carnivalesque orientation, Shakespeare developed a dramaturgy whose scripted panegyrics to courtly rule were countered by

inbuilt *stagecraft* shibboleths, structured to enable graphic demolition *in amphitheater performance* of official ideological rhetorics.

The Earl of Essex, England's most popular man with the Cadiz Expedition, launched a self-promoting propaganda campaign from 1595 onwards (the Accession Day display, the *Profitable Instructions*, later the *True Relacion* of the Cadiz adventure), which included wooing the commons with conspicuous 'downward deference' and promotion of nationalist jingoism. Yet the martial darling of the masses was a haughty hard-liner false in his populism, heedless of spilling English blood, contemptuous of commoners and common law, and undeterred by arbitrary taxation and martial law. Shakespeare reacted with plays that unmasked hot-tempered, unstable, war-obsessed, megalomaniac noblemen, each recognizable as a discreet encoding of Essex, as treacherously anti-populist. Exposé worked most powerfully through 'stagecraft secrets' built not only into *Richard II*, but also *1 Henry IV*, *Henry V*, *Hamlet*, and early work such as *2 Henry VI*. This paper demonstrates Shakespearean unmasking through precalculated performance dimensions invisible on the censor's manuscript page.

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Theatre in Practice: Burbage, Shakespeare and the Earls of Essex and Leicester

In 'Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, and the Practice of Theatre,' in *Essex: The Life and Times of an Elizabethan Courtier*, ed. Annaliese Connolly and Lisa Hopkins (MUP, 2013, pp. 63-80), I argued that we can only understand Essex's connections to theatre by studying the patronage of Essex and his closest family members, friends, and allies of acting companies, including Essex's Men, the Countess of Essex's Men, and Leicester's Men. In this paper, I take a closer look at these acting companies in order to attempt to figure out if their paths crossed with those of Essex.

Alan Stewart
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Ways of Reading Essex

This paper re-examine one of the classic charges against Essex: his alleged involvement in the 1599 book dedicated to him, *The first part of the life and raigne of King Henri the IIII* by John Hayward. It was his erstwhile friend Francis Bacon who first charged Essex with manipulating the publication and suppression of Hayward's book at the York House hearing of June 1600: I examine Bacon's prosecution in relation to his subsequent re-tellings of the story in his *Apologie, in certaine imputations concerning the*

late earle of Essex (1604) and *Apophthegms old and new* (1625), and the mass of manuscript evidence resulting from government interrogations of the parties involved. This paper thus analyses the dynamics of print culture in an attempt to understand how Essex both manipulated and was damaged by this book.

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**Samuel Daniel's Philotas (1605) and the Staging of the Earl of Essex
in Early Jacobean England**

Samuel Daniel's Philotas is best known for the Privy Council's finding a suspicious similarity between the main character of the play and the Earl of Essex. Essex's rebellion and trial had happened just four years before, and he was still a popular subject of discussion. The public displayed an avid appetite for written and visual representations of Essex's life and death. Daniel thematizes this appetite by presenting two conflicting popular perceptions of Essex in the character of Philotas. Philotas at times closely resembles the characterization of Essex that the prosecution presented at his trial: an ambitious over-reacher willing to betray his prince in order to gain supreme power. At other times, Philotas as clearly represents Essex's characterization of himself as victimized by highly-placed enemies and forced to act in self-defense.

Ultimately, however, Daniel refuses to choose between versions of Essex and conclude decisively about his "real" motives, his guilt or innocence. In doing so, the play examines the phenomenon of the staging of a popular public figure and concludes that there is no way to discover the truth about such a figure – or rather, there is no such inner truth to be recovered by a playwright.