

A. Essex, Raleigh and Late-Elizabethan Politics (c.1590-1603)

Libels and other partisan documents which were discreetly circulated in manuscript form seemed to proliferate during the latter part of Elizabeth I's reign, as did the surreptitious printing or importing of "banned books". Many of these clandestine writings and copyings were encouraged by the religious policies of the Elizabethan regime, which attracted sharp criticism from both Catholic recusants and extremist Puritans (especially Presbyterians) by the late 1560s. Perhaps the most significant of these religious tracts were the "Martin Marprelate" pamphlets which were secretly printed and disseminated by Presbyterian radicals in 1588-89. Ironically, such critiques gained extra currency from the Elizabethan government's own efforts to punish these authors and discredit their ideas. In their endeavour to crack down on libel-spreaders and publicly counter the claims of "seditious" writers and printers, the ecclesiastical authorities and the Privy Council gave their critics the oxygen of publicity and effectively recognized a kind of proto-"public sphere" which was entirely contrary to the legal orthodoxy that the business of government was secret and the actions of the sovereign were accountable only to God (Lake and Questier).

The most notorious and widely-circulated libel of the Elizabethan era was a prose attack by Catholic exile writers on the Queen's great favourite, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. Printed overseas under the title of *The copy of a letter written by a Master of Art of Cambridge* in 1584, this work quickly became known as "Leicester's Commonwealth" (*Leicester's Commonwealth*). Although printed copies were smuggled into England (despite official efforts to suppress it), the work also circulated widely in the form of manuscript copies, as well as spawning shorter derivative libels such as "News from heaven and hell" ("News from heaven and hell"). In 1592, William Cecil, Lord Burghley, the Lord Treasurer and Elizabeth's most influential advisor, received similar treatment from Catholic polemicists, following a new government crackdown on Catholic nonconformity in late 1591. Tracts such as Richard Verstegan's *A declaration of the true causes of the great troubles* (1592) and Robert Parsons' (or Persons') *An advertisement written to a secretarie of my L. Treasurers of Inghland* (1592) were smuggled into the realm and collectively created the defamatory notion of "Burghley's commonwealth" or a *regnum Cecilianum*, in which Elizabeth and her realm were shamelessly manipulated for the

benefit of the Cecil family and their supporters.

During the mid-1590s, the task of the Privy Council in stemming libels and other “seditious” writings became even more difficult because a factional divide emerged at the very heart of Elizabethan government, which created growing tensions at the Council board itself. Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, who emerged as the Queen’s dominant royal favourite after the deaths of the Earl of Leicester and Sir Christopher Hatton in 1588 and 1591, espoused an expansive war policy against Spain which was increasingly at odds with the wishes of Elizabeth. Essex’s political ambitions also provoked growing resentment from older members of the Council, especially the septuagenarian Lord Burghley, who mistrusted Essex’s martial aspirations and was anxious to promote the career of his own younger son, Sir Robert Cecil. Thwarted in his efforts to win over Elizabeth to his agenda, Essex began to circulate letters and treatises in manuscript form which advocated policies markedly different from those endorsed by the Queen. The most important and widely-copied of these tracts was a letter nominally addressed to his friend Anthony Bacon, which was later printed as *An apologie of the earle of Essex against those which falsly and maliciously taxe him to be the onely hinderer of the peace and quiet of his countrey* (1603). Such behaviour infuriated his conciliar colleagues, as did the Earl’s constant efforts at self-promotion, which were increasingly seen as courting the sort of popular acclaim that the Elizabethan regime reserved solely for the Queen herself (Hammer, “The smiling crocodile”). A growing number of courtiers began to line up against Essex and his friends, including Burghley (who died in 1598), Sir Robert Cecil and his brother-in-law Henry Brooke (who succeeded as 11th Lord Cobham in 1597), and Sir Walter Raleigh, who had lost out to Essex in the competition to become the new royal favourite in the late 1580s (Hammer, *Polarisation*).

Most of the libels in Section A relate directly to this bitter factional struggle during the closing years of Elizabeth’s reign. Raleigh, in particular, had a combative nature and skill with the pen, as did Essex. Although Essex and Raleigh were banned from actually using swords during their competition for the Queen’s favour between 1587 and 1591, both men seem to have challenged each other with mocking poems (May, *Elizabethan Courtier Poets* 119-125). As the most important literary patron of the 1590s, Essex attracted many writers who were eager to use their pens in similar fashion once factional rivalry for political ascendancy began to become

obvious in the mid-1590s. Essex's own carefully-cultivated public image also made his cause seem more noble and that of his opponents more corrupt. Given that Sir Robert Cecil emerged as Essex's most substantial political rival and the Earl's following included a significant number of Catholics, it is perhaps not surprising that features of the Catholic critique of the so-called *regnum Cecilianum* in the early 1590s re-emerged in the context of this struggle between Essex and his enemies in the late 1590s. More generally, the rivalry between Essex and his enemies also echoed in the work of satirical writers such as Nashe, Marston and Guilpin, whose troubling publications were formally suppressed by Archbishop Whitgift and Bishop Bancroft on 1 June 1599 (Clegg 198-217).

When Essex was arrested in September 1599 after his return from Ireland, in what seemed like murky circumstances, the intense speculation about the cause and significance of this event prompted a veritable flood of libels against the Earl's rivals. At the end of November, members of the Privy Council delivered a series of speeches in Star Chamber in an attempt publicly to justify Essex's arrest. In doing so, they also vented their fury at the anonymous personal attacks against them. Lord Keeper Egerton, for example, inveighed against "the iniquitye of these dayes, that the taverns and ordinaries are filled with tales of governement and matters of state, and they so farr proceede that they scatter libells, which doe falcely and trayterouslye slaunder her sacred Majestie and her whole counsell, nay in such manner as though (after 42 yeares' governement) she knewe not whom to rewarde. They are dangerous enemyes and deseine to refuse the governement of the realme. I call them traytors, for the lawe condemnes [them] as traytors, but our state doe not severely punishe yt, and yet they are traytors". Lord Treasurer Buckhurst echoed this opinion: "they deserve death better then open enemies: they are dangerous & who can be fre from their stroake; they lurke in secret and ought to be subject to the censure of death. There ys remedy against the sworde, against gunshott &c, but none against backebyters & libellers". Sir Robert Cecil, who was perhaps the most frequently vilified member of the council, complained that libellers were "vipers" and "the children of the divell, for he ys the author of all lyes and there ys no truth in their papers" (Folger MS V.b.142, fols. 49r-v, 50r).

Yet no amount of public condemnation could stem the flow of libels. Shortly after the Star Chamber speeches, Francis Bacon (the younger brother of Anthony) felt obliged to respond to

the latest tales shaped in “the London forge”. As a highly conspicuous former dependent of the Earl, Bacon attracted particular comment for his public efforts against Essex while acting in his capacity as one of the Queen’s legal counsel. Bacon’s solution was to write a letter to one of the Earl’s aristocratic friends, Lord Henry Howard, to complain about the unfair criticism and to circulate it and Howard’s reply in manuscript form (HMC Hatfield 9.405-07). However, this manoeuvre proved wholly inadequate when Bacon took a leading role in the trial which resulted in Essex’s execution in February 1601. Like the Earl’s more conspicuous enemies, such as Raleigh, Cobham and Cecil, Bacon carried a stigma from his involvement in Essex’s death which lasted for years afterwards. When Essex’s reputation received a limited public rehabilitation after the accession of James in March 1603, the recriminations surrounding Bacon’s conduct resurfaced and Bacon again felt obliged to respond publicly, this time in the form of a letter to another friend of Essex, Charles Blount, Earl of Devonshire (formerly Lord Mountjoy). Published as *Sir Francis Bacon his apologie, in certaine imputations concerning the late earle of Essex* (1604), the work went through four printings during 1604-05. Like many of the libels included in later sections, Bacon’s need to pen his *Apologie* is testimony to the intense passions aroused during the great political struggle of Elizabeth’s last years and the magnetism of Essex’s name and memory. For the winners in the great Elizabethan political battle, the taint associated with their victory would perhaps outlast even the Essexians’ bitterness at their defeat.