

A12 He that in Belgia fought for Englandes Queene

Notes. This libel contrasts the long and heroic military record of Essex with the villainy of “Cankred Cecil”, who supposedly contrived the Earl’s death. While Essex’s battles were “fought for Englandes Queene”, and in every theatre in which English forces were engaged in the war against Spain, Cecil’s triumph is portrayed as that of an evil disease, the very success of which only confirms his malignity. In contrast to Essex’s repeated participation in honourable combat, Cecil “slew” him by means that reflect his own foul and dishonourable nature.

“Of Robert E. of Essex”

He that in Belgia fought for Englandes Queene;¹

he that soe oft in bloodie-field was seene:

he that did knocke at Lisbone’s statelye gate,²

He that was fitt’st to give Mars check-mate:³

He that proud Spaine so oft did put in feare:

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He that in Fra: at Roune⁴ brave Armes did beare:

He that did Cales surprise and Captaines wake:⁵

He that strong seated Flores, and Corves did take⁶

He that did make tyrone to yeald to peace;⁷

Him Cankred Cecill slew, but not disease.⁸

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Source. CUL Add. MS 4138, fol. 49r

Other known sources. Bodleian MS Firth d.7, fol. 158r

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¹ *He that in Belgia...Queene:* in 1586, Essex served as Lieutenant-General of the cavalry in the Anglo-Dutch army, which was commanded by his step-father, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. Essex was subsequently knighted for his bravery at the battle of Zutphen (in which Sir Philip Sidney was mortally wounded) in September 1586.

² *he that did knocke...gate:* in April 1589, Essex escaped from court to join the expedition which Sir John Norris and Sir Francis Drake led against Spain and Portugal. When the English army proved

unable to capture the Portuguese capital of Lisbon, Essex thrust his lance into the city gates before he reluctantly joined the retreat. George Peele celebrated this action in his *Eclogue gratulory* (1589), claiming that Essex “brake his Launce, with terror and renowne, / Against the gates of slaughtered Rhemus Towne” (B1r-v).

³ *give Mars check-mate*: Mars was the classical god of war, while “check-mate” alludes to victory in chess. Essex is known to have played chess, but the meaning here is probably that Essex’s expertise in war exceeded even that of Mars himself.

⁴ *Fra: at Roune*: Essex commanded an English army that was sent to France in 1591 to join the forces of Henri IV of France in besieging the city of Rouen, which was controlled by forces of the Catholic League which were opposed to Henri’s claim to the French Crown. Essex repeatedly joined the front-line fighting in this unsuccessful campaign, despite repeated warnings from Elizabeth not to endanger himself.

⁵ *He that did Cales surprise...wake*: in 1596, Essex was co-commander (with the Lord Admiral, Lord Howard of Effingham) of an English fleet which launched a surprise attack on the Spanish port of Cadiz (“Cales”) and destroyed a Spanish fleet guarding its harbour. Essex subsequently landed a small number of soldiers and attacked the city so quickly that the Spanish defenders panicked and the Earl and his men were able to capture Cadiz itself.

⁶ *He that strong seated Flores...take*: in 1597, Essex commanded a major naval expedition which sailed to the Azores Islands (the so-called “Azores” or “Islands” voyage), briefly occupying the islands of Flores and Cuervo.

⁷ *He that did make tyrone...peace*: a rather optimistic interpretation of Essex’s Irish campaign of 1599. Essex was given an army of unprecedented size and charged with crushing the “rebellion” led by Hugh O’Neill, Earl of Tyrone. Despite some initial success in the south, Essex found himself unable to assault Tyrone’s main army in Ulster and consequently agreed a truce with the rebel leader. This truce infuriated Elizabeth and prompted charges of misconduct against Essex after his return to England.

⁸ *Him Cankred Cecill...disease*: i.e. “Cankred Cecil” contrived Essex’s death, but such great cunning is still insufficient to cure Cecil of his own incurable malignity. The idea that Cecil “slew” Essex refers to the contemporary belief that Cecil either goaded Essex into his fatal mis-step (using Raleigh, Cobham and Grey, in particular, as his cat’s-paws) or was responsible for branding as treason Essex’s effort to rally support within the City of London on 8 February 1601, and ensuring that Essex was undeservedly sentenced to death for this action.
