

The Courtier and the Queen: The fates of Elizabeth's favorites

When Elizabeth Tudor heard the news, on November 17, 1558, that her sister Mary had died and she was the new queen of England, not even the great astrologer John Dee could have known that Elizabeth would reign for forty-five years and die still Queen, still unmarried, and transformed into an epoch and an icon. In order to survive religious quarrels and challenges to her rule from within and to the nation from without, Elizabeth relied on canny statesmen, her own personality, and the projection of that personality into a myth. Her collaborators were her poets, orators, musicians, and impresarios—many of whom were also soldiers, sailors, spies, and statesmen. All Renaissance courts were intimate arenas where power depended on closeness to the sovereign, the construction of factions and, in part at least, on talents we might now regard as personal rather than professional: throwing a really great party, for example, or riding one's horse superbly.

Elizabeth's character seems to have been both powerful and whimsical. In her famous speech at Tilbury before the troops and people who awaited the invasion of the Spanish fleet in 1588, she said:

. . . I do assure you, I do not desire to live to distrust my faithful and loving people. Let tyrants fear. I have always so behaved myself that, under God, I have placed my chiefest strength and safeguard in the loyal hearts and goodwill of my subjects, and therefore I am come among you, as you see, at this time, not for my recreation and disport, but being resolved in the midst and heat of the battle to live or die amongst you all, to lay down for my God and for my kingdom, and for my people, my honor and my blood, even in the dust.

The same woman capable of this majestic and direct rhetoric was also, however, notorious for making and unmaking her mind. It took her fifteen years to agree with her advisors that her cousin Mary of Scotland was too dangerous a rival to keep alive. More than one ambassador, trying to arrange a match for his prince, or a treaty, wrote home in exasperation: *I give up trying to make sense of Her Majesty, she says one thing and does another (or nothing at all).*

All four of our featured heroes are exemplary "Renaissance men" of Elizabeth's reign, three of them from the later part of Elizabeth's reign, when the great anxieties of her first decades of rule—the question of her marriage, the danger of Mary Stuart's claim to the throne and of Catholic Spain's military challenge—had been muted if not settled, and her image complete as virgin goddess, encased in gems and stiffened fabrics, compared to "virtually every flattering female deity of classical and biblical mythology . . . from the Old Testament, the heroines, Judith and Deborah; from Greece and Rome and Renaissance Italy, Diana, Cynthia, and the Petrarchan mistress, the Platonically learned Laura." From her intimates at least this literary adoration was also couched in terms of love, a late echo of the medieval *chevalier's* hopeless passion for his lady.

Sir Philip Sidney, described by his contemporary Fulke Greville as the 'president of chivalry', was born in 1554, the son of Sir Henry Sidney, Lord Deputy of Ireland, and nephew of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, Queen Elizabeth's early favorite. Leaving Oxford without taking a degree, he traveled the continent before returning to England in 1575 to become, though not a favorite of the queen, a popular and eminent courtier. An active patron as well as practitioner of the arts, he encouraged young poets such as Edmund Spenser, who dedicated *The Shepherdes Calendar* to him. An ardent protestant, he incurred the queen's wrath by opposing her projected marriage to the Catholic Duke of Anjou. Dismissed from court, he resided for a time at the estate of his sister Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, where he composed his long pastoral romance *Arcadia*. He also authored *The Defence of Poesy*, and the inspiration for his sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella* may have arisen during his courtship of Penelope Devereux, the sister of the second Earl of Essex and Robert Dudley's step daughter. Sidney later met Giordano Bruno, who dedicated two books to him.

Sidney returned to court by 1581, and was knighted in 1583. In 1585, without the queen's permission, he secretly tried to join Frances Drake's expedition to Cadiz. She instead recalled him to court and made him Governor of Flushing in the Netherlands. In a skirmish with the Spanish he was wounded by a musket ball that shattered his thigh, and he died twenty-two days later, not yet thirty-two years of age. Though he was associated with no great political or martial accomplishments, he was accorded an elaborate funeral of the type usually reserved for great noblemen, and nearly every English poet composed verses in his praise, for he died the embodiment of Elizabethan honor and virtue.

Sir Walter Raleigh is perhaps best remembered for two things he might not have done: spreading his cloak for the Queen to walk on (not impossible at a time when conspicuous gallantry could receive conspicuous reward) and introducing tobacco to England from the New World. Born in 1552, the son of a Devonshire gentleman, he first went to war in 1569 in France. In 1578 he participated in a "piratical venture" against Spanish ships, which failed, and he came to court to make his fortune: tall, handsome, witty, energetic and hotheaded, if we can judge by his being twice arrested for brawling. He served with ferocity in 1580's campaigns in Ireland; when he returned to court his fortunes rose, in the way of Renaissance courtiers' fortunes: the queen granted him a military commission that meant he could draw the salary and send a deputy to fight; she gave him the lease of a London house, a patent to grant tavern-keepers' licenses, a monopoly on cloth exports, the position of Warden of the Stannaries, and finally a grant of land in Ireland where he was to develop English colonies. It has been noted that for all these marks of favor Elizabeth never named Raleigh to her privy council or gave him any position of real power. In 1584 Raleigh received patents for exploration and started to organize the expeditions to the

Americas for which Americans, at least, are aware of him. His Virginia (Roanoke) colonies failed, and the ascendancy of Essex at court pushed Raleigh to the background. A venture to harass Spanish shipping in 1592 was more successful, capturing a Portuguese carrack, but meanwhile Raleigh's seduction of Bess Throckmorton angered Elizabeth and she had him recalled and confined in the Tower. He married Bess and was permitted to retire to the country. In 1595 he led an expedition to South America. His narrative of the voyage, *The Discoverie of Guiana*, is remarkable, but the venture itself failed. We hear that "He was now the most unpopular man in England, not only among the courtiers, but in the nation, for his greed, arrogance and alleged scepticism in religion. In 1590 he was named with the poet Marlowe and others as an atheist." He resumed his rivalry with Essex, the most popular of the courtiers, and for all that Essex was loved and he was not, it was Raleigh that oversaw Essex's execution. However, James I's accession in 1603 ended Raleigh's court career. He was associated with conspiracies against the new king and was thrown into the Tower, eventually spending ten years there under sentence of death, but able to pursue his interests in natural philosophy, in poetry, and in history. He was released in 1617 to lead a new expedition to the Americas, claiming that he could find gold in an area not claimed by Spain (unlikely!). Failing utterly and losing the remnants of his fortune, he returned to England and was executed under the 1603 death sentence.

Sir Henry Lee was related to many of the best-placed people at the Tudor courts. Beginning in service to Henry VIII at age 14, Lee managed to serve four Tudors and one Stuart. His marriage was prudent but unhappy, and his long affair with Anne Vavasour (maid of honor to Elizabeth, who had already been mistress of the Earl of Oxford and borne his son) later created scandal. (Irregular fornication with a queen's maid of honor was no slight matter: both Anne and Oxford were imprisoned in the Tower of London for a time, as were Walter Raleigh and Bess Throckmorton.) Lee made a grand tour of Europe with his brother-in-law Henry Paget in 1559-60 and again in 1568, reporting back to Elizabeth's court and acquiring the "flowers of knighthood, courtesy and valour," according to a contemporary. He was a skillful jousting and fought in the Scottish wars; Elizabeth made him lieutenant of the royal manor of Woodstock where he several times entertained her with elaborate and clever festivities. He brought this talent to London in 1580, becoming master of the armoury and thus responsible for the Accession-day tilts, with their theatrical presentations of Elizabeth's glories. He himself served as her champion in gorgeous armour; it was upon his resignation of this position in 1590 that he arranged for "His golden locks," in its Dowland setting, to be sung. (Ferne, in the DNB, comments that "this famous lyric . . . may or may not be by Lee himself.") After Elizabeth's death, Lee attended James I's accession, hosted Queen Anne at Ditchley, and received an annuity from the crown until his own death in 1611.

Handsome, active, likeable (but subject to moods), Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, came to Elizabeth's court when he was about twenty and the Queen fifty-five. Robert Devereux's mother, Lettice (nee Knollys), was a cousin of Queen Elizabeth's mother Anne Boleyn. In 1560 Lettice married Walter Devereux, then Viscount Hereford. Rumors of an affair with Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, Elizabeth's great favorite in the first part of her reign, arose in 1565, when Lettice was pregnant with her first son, Robert. Leicester stood godfather to the boy and, in 1578, two years after Walter – now Earl of Essex – died in Ireland, Lettice did in fact marry Leicester in his house at Wanstead.

Robert acceded to the earldom in 1576 at age 11. In 1585 he went with Leicester, his stepfather, to court and then to the Dutch wars in which Leicester commanded. He performed well at the battle of Zutphen. At that same battle Sir Philip Sidney died, bequeathing to Essex a sword and, by extension, the claim to his own reputation as perfect scholar-poet-courtier-knight. In 1590 Essex married Sidney's widow.

Upon his return to court, Essex charmed the Queen and became her frequent companion, so that "he commeth not to his owne lodginge tyll the birdes singe in the morninge." Leicester arranged for the position as Master of the Horse that he had held since Elizabeth's accession in 1558 to be passed to Essex, and at the Armada crisis of midsummer 1588 Essex was named commander of the cavalry in the army of which his stepfather was general. (Of course, in the event the great Spanish Armada was defeated by Drake and the English fleet, and by the winds, and the army had nothing to do.)

Leicester's death in September 1588 left Essex without his patron and badly in debt, not an uncommon state throughout his life. (Being a favored courtier was an expensive occupation, especially if you sought a popular reputation. Even military ventures required investment by the commanders.) Elizabeth gave him a tax farm (on sweet wines) and allowed him to lease the estate at Wanstead where his mother had married Leicester, and Leicester's London house.

Essex was ambitious to lead in England; while he profited by his closeness to the Queen, he resented the exigencies of flattery and subservience that court life demanded, especially subservience to a woman. He was known to be high-tempered, quick to take offense, "a great resenter and weak dissembler of the least disgrace," and subject to periods of gloom. His relationship with the queen was marked by repeated harsh words, sulks, and reconciliations. But at the same time he was generous and open to suitors, if often unsuccessful in obtaining for them their desires.

In 1591, Essex was given command of a force sent to Normandy to combine with Henri IV in his fight against the French Catholics and their Spanish allies: the expedition eventually failed completely, despite Essex's successful pleas for additional funds and his conspicuous bravery. His brother Walter was killed. His closeness to the French king sparked the queen's suspicion. And, on his return, the position of chancellor of Oxford University was given to another man, and Lord Burghley's son Robert Cecil, no soldier, joined the privy council. The factional lines were drawn.

Essex himself joined the privy council in 1593 and tried to establish himself as the successor to Burghley, who was aging and ill. He took on foreign affairs, and in the vexed matter of religion set himself up as a champion of toleration of Catholics, if not of Spain and Spanish power. He positioned himself as a military leader, disbursed patronage and built friendships in the diplomatic corps, clergy, and scholarly circles. He secretly communicated with James VI of Scotland, offering his support to James' succession claim. He urged Elizabeth to maintain ties with France and to regard Spain as a constant danger. In 1596 Essex led an attack that destroyed the Spanish fleet in Cadiz harbor and stormed the city.

The next year Essex convinced the queen to approve a naval attack on Spain. He and his followers invested heavily in a strong fleet and army. However, the winds prevented the intended invasion, the army fell sick, and the leaders decided instead to sail to the Azores and try to capture the Spanish treasure ships. They failed (by three hours!), they returned to England to find a Spanish fleet heading for Falmouth and had to scramble to devise defences, and, while the attack was dispersed by the wind, the whole venture was an expensive disaster, damaging Essex's credit both financial and personal. Meanwhile, his rival Robert Cecil had been named secretary of state, and Admiral Howard, his co-leader of the Cadiz expedition, seemed to be getting all the credit for it.

Continental politics had also moved on. Henri IV signed a peace treaty with Spain in 1598, dismantling the alliance among France, Holland, and England. Elizabeth and her other statesmen were also looking towards settlement rather than aggression. The dramatic moment came on July 1, in the course of a dispute over the naming of a new Lord Deputy for Ireland. In a gross breach of etiquette, Essex deliberately turned his back on the Queen. She slapped his head and cursed him, and he put his hand on his sword and said, "he neither could nor would put up so great an affront and indignity, neither would he have taken it at King Henry the Eighth his hands." He was prevented from striking her, but he had gone too far; he left court at once for Wanstead and, rather than immediately suing for forgiveness, wrote letters with dangerous comments like: "What, cannot princes err? cannot subjects receive wrong? is an earthly power or authority infinite?" It was a difficult moment, with the death of Lord Burghley (Elizabeth's principal counselor since her accession) in August, and of Philip of Spain in September, and news of military disaster in Ireland. The queen and Essex were reconciled by mid September. Essex himself would go to put down the rebels under the Earl of Tyrone, who had ambushed and destroyed an English force. Elizabeth agreed to raise and pay for a large army, and Essex declared that he was not afraid of the Irish, but only of the political maneuverings by the Cecil-Bacon-Raleigh faction that would take place when he was gone.

Essex left in late March 1599. He had intended a quick strike against the North, where Tyrone was; instead he found himself fighting in the South, and realizing that the dramatic victory he had envisaged was impossible. Elizabeth insisted that he proceed against Tyrone. In September he arranged a parley, at which he and Tyrone spoke privately: the terms are unknown, but a truce was agreed, and Essex, ill, turned back to Dublin. On hearing of it, the queen wrote back: "It appeareth by your journal that you and the traitor spoke half an hour together without anybody's hearing, wherein, though we that trust you with a kingdom are far from mistrusting you with a traitor, yet we marvel you could carry it no better. If we had meant that Ireland should have been abandoned, then it was very superfluous to have sent over a personage such as yourself." She again demanded that he bring Tyrone to battle. But before her letter arrived in Ireland Essex had abruptly left for England, and four days later burst into her private chamber at Nonsuch Palace, he mud-soaked, she not yet dressed. His defense of his actions could not satisfy the council, and he was placed under arrest at York House, and there he remained, sick with kidney stones and dysentery, till March 1600. The charges of treason that Elizabeth had been contemplating finally seemed insufficient, although he had clearly been incompetent and defiant of royal authority; in addition, public opinion favored him. In the summer, he was released from all confinement, but he was forbidden to go to court. He had no position, much debt, and no income.

Essex turned to conspiracy. Disaffected persons of all kinds gathered and plotted. Messages were sent to James VI suggesting that the Cecil party at court backed the Spanish Infanta's claim to the throne, and asking for troops. Such a noisy and generalized conspiracy could not be kept secret from Cecil and his agents and friends. On February 7, 1601, Essex was called to appear before the council, and refused. His friends and supporters gathered on the 8th to march into the City of London. They were largely unarmed, and Essex swore that no harm should come to the Queen: can he have thought to rule through her? The support they expected from London's sheriff and people failed to materialize. The leaders were arrested, and Essex went to the tower on the 9th. On the 19th, he was tried for treason and convicted, along with the earl of Southampton.

By all reports he went meekly and soberly to his end, though the bit about the collar of his doublet getting in the way of the axe seems like invention.

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