

Catholic Movements, Essex's Political Cause and the Composition of Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*

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Introduction

In *All's Well That Ends Well*, the French King suffered from a “fistula” (1.1.25) or “a swelling upon his breast” (Bullough 390), which Helena succeeds in curing within a day (2.1.157-61). Even if the technology has advanced, the condition of the King lying dying could not be completely reversed even by modern medicine within so short a time. He becomes “able to lead her [even] a coranto” (2.3.37). Similarly, Helena goes on “pilgrimage” (4.3.41; “pilgrim” 3.4.3, 3.5.26, 32, 37, 84) to “Saint Jaques” (3.4.4, 3.5.27, 86, 4.3.41). In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer’s wife of Bath had visited the shrine where St James’s body was buried (22), so does Helena visit his “relics” (1.1.86). She expresses her love for Bertram in the imagery of Catholic worship: “Now he’s gone, and my idolatrous fancy / Must sanctify his relics (1.1.85-86). Indeed, the power of divine healing has Biblical grounds (1 Cor. 12:9, 30), but Shakespeare’s contemporaries may have thought there were no more “miracles”: “They say miracles are past” (2.3.1). Samuel Harsnett, “chaplain of the Protestant Bishop of London” Richard Bancroft (later the Archbishop of Canterbury), expresses the similar idea that “miracles are ceased” (qtd. in Richmond 67) in his *A Discovery of the Fraudulent Practices of Iohn Darrel* (1599), which was an “orthodox Anglican position” (ibid. 67). His *A Declaration of Egregious Popishe Impostures* of 1603 had influence on *King Lear*. My argument derives from the question why Shakespeare dares to present in *All's Well* such strong Catholic elements like “miracles” and “pilgrimage” inherited from the socio-religious medieval tradition in the time of the Church of England.

In addition of that textual evidence, when we take the external political situation around the composition date seriously, we may well infer that the play intentionally employs Catholic beliefs. *All's Well* has been regarded as a problem

play since Boas named it as such in his 1896 *Shakespeare and his Predecessors* (344-57). In the 19th century, there had developed a new and wide movement of realism in theatre and other arts, especially influenced by Henrik Ibsen's innovative works, which dealt with contemporary society's problems and its moral values. Boas sees the same kind of themes in Shakespeare's plays. He posits that "the dramatist's change from gaiety to gloom . . . [is partly caused by] the failure of the conspiracy of Essex, followed by the execution of the Earl . . ." (344). Bate also writes of Essex's influence on Shakespeare in "Essex man? A Political Tragedy in Five Acts": "regardless of Shakespeare's semi-concealed political intentions in making the allusion—one gets the sense that he is only somewhere a little over halfway to being an Essex man" (272). On politics Shakespeare is usually extremely circumspect, never ending up in trouble, unlike other playwrights. For example, "*Eastward Ho* by George Chapman, Ben Jonson, and John Marston which contains "anti-Scottish satire" was performed in Jacobean times, so Chapman and Jonson were imprisoned and Marston went into hiding" ("Introduction" *Macbeth The New Cambridge* 12 n.3). Boas writes: *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Hamlet* "may be assigned to the last three years of Elizabeth's reign" (345), which was "the late Elizabethan crisis" (qtd. in Hammer 4). It is a time when Catholicism had been increasingly reanimated especially in relation to Essex's political success, but also when the Catholic movements were severely and suddenly threatened by his abrupt return from Ireland on 28 September 1600. They were completely damaged by the subsequent Rising on 8 February 1601 and his execution on 25 February 1601. Since Essex "professed dislike of persecuting Catholics," there should be no surprise at "the sheer number of Catholics who associated themselves with the earl's cause" (Hammer 10, 32). English Catholics had hope for toleration by following him, which collapsed after his death. His chief political enemy was Robert Cecil, whom English Catholics "associated . . . with unduly harsh and arbitrary enforcement of laws against individual Catholics. Catholic followers of Essex hoped the removal of the earl's enemies from the queen's presence would immediately lessen this religious persecution" (ibid. 31). Furthermore, there was the "Archpriest controversy [1598-1603], an argument over most appropriate form of church government for the English Catholics" (Nicholls 103). "The most fundamental split of all was that between those Catholics who wished to come to some agreement with the authorities"

(ibid. 103) including “the ‘secular priest’ who sought the appointment of a bishop and ecclesiastical hierarchy in England” (ibid. 104), “and those who were reluctant to contemplate compromising their beliefs” (ibid. 103) including most English Jesuits, who felt the need to form a new “government more suited to a protracted campaign” to resist “open persecution” (ibid. 104). English Catholics would have been fervently pursuing those political movements with their breath held.

On the composition of *All's Well, The Arden* says if it is earlier than *Measure for Measure*, “A tentative dating [is] in 1603-4” (xxv) before *Measure's* performance at Whitehall of 26 December 1604. *The Oxford Shakespeare* sees Lavatch's complaint “That man should be at woman's command” (1.3.73) and “Parolles's scornful picture of ‘old virginity’, withered, out of fashion, and not in demand” as “probable allusions to Elizabeth,” which were “risky on the Elizabethan stage,” and “suggest a date after—but not long after—her death in March 1603 and the immediate mourning period: 1604-5” (23). This requires placing *All's Well* afterward, even though “most editors have thought, *All's Well* was the earlier of the two” (24). Leggatt in “Introduction” of *The New Cambridge* narrows the date down to 1603 (5-11). “The King's war policy—stay out of it, but let your young men fight if they want to—is not unlike Queen Elizabeth's policy for the Low Countries” (10). In the play, the King permits his “gentlemen [nobles]” to fight on either side: “. . . freely have they leave / To stand on either part” (1.2.13-15). The Duke of Florence complains to the First Lord and the Second Lord that he refuses to send reinforcements: “France / Would in so just a business shut his bosom / Against our borrowing prayers [entreaties for assistance]” (3.1.7-9n). The King is aloof from the war while the young nobles such as Bertram and those French Lords are committed to the cause. The Second Lord refers to the uncertainty about his county's war policy and complains of himself feeling betrayed: “I have found / Myself in my incertain grounds to fail [to read France's direction in policy] / As often as I guessed” (3.1.14-16). These things may allude to “Elizabeth's own determination not to send an army to aid the Dutch” (*Polarisation* 44), but the Queen still continues her policy of “prevarication” (ibid. 43). Once Burghley “became closely involved in the negotiations with the Dutch for a treaty of assistance” (ibid. 43, 46), although he was truly loyal to Elizabeth's “unwillingness to intervene,” the committed Protestant nobles had to fear that “Elizabeth might

find some way to renege on her new commitment to protect the Dutch” (ibid. 46). Leggatt concludes that both the King’s war policy and Lavatch’s complaint “could suggest a date just after the Queen’s death. The play features a monarch dying and reborn: are we on the cusp between Elizabeth and James?” (11).

As Boas insists, the “gloom” of the play is remarkably intense, especially at the opening when the four characters appear “*all in black*.” The dominant mood is too serious for comedy, as Leggatt refers to “the note of loss [that] is struck over and over” (7). In 1.1 in Rossillion, the play starts during the aftermath of Bertram’s father’s death, with the Countess mourning over her husband and Helena’s father is also lamented, while in 1.2 in Paris, the old King lying dying grieves for Bertram’s father and quotes his father’s speech, “‘Let me not live’ . . . ‘Let me not live’” (ll. 55-58). The “gloom” including Helena’s fears about Bertram’s possible “death” (3.4.16) in war may represent the collapse of the growing hope of English Catholics for religious toleration which could have arrived as a collateral effect of Essex’s political success. That is to say, the play’s opening may be an oblique representation of Essex’s death on 25 February 1601.

Shakespeare was brought up in a strong Catholic family. The name of his father John Shakespeare “is the first on a March 1592 list of recusants” and that of his favorite daughter Susanna “appeared as one of twenty-two on the recusants’ list for 1606” (Richmond 81, 82). Shakespeare’s mother Mary was from the Ardens, who “were strongly Catholic. . . . Mary’s cousin Edward Arden of Park Hall was indicted for treason in 1583. He and his son-in-law John Somerville were executed . . . and the family imprisoned, all part of the investigation . . . about the Somerville plot to kill the Queen” (ibid. 79-80). In those days, there was a real threat to Elizabeth’s life from Catholics. In 1584, both “Catholic plots against the life of Elizabeth” and “the presence of Mary Queen of Scots” produced even the “extraordinary document [of the Bond of Association], which was signed by the leading gentlemen of every county, was a commitment to virtual lynch law in the event of Elizabeth’s assassination” (*Polarisation* 41). “The presence of Mary within the realm was a constant reminder to councillors that their administration depended upon the single thread of the queen’s life” (ibid. 42). “Until the early 1580s, when she [Elizabeth] became too old” to “produce a child of her own,” they had to “cut Mary out,” because her “succession represented a nightmare prospect” which would pose a dangerous threat of “the persecution of Protestants” by being exposed to

“interference in English affairs by foreign powers [notably Spain and France],” and ending “their political predominance” (ibid. 42). That above Edward Arden was also “uncle to two of the leading conspirators, Catesby and Tresham” (Shapiro 116) in the Gunpowder Plot.

Furthermore, the Earl of Southampton, Shakespeare’s patron, to whom his *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* are dedicated, was from “a powerful Catholic family” (Richmond 84). His father, the second earl of Southampton, was “one of those implicated in the 1569 Catholic Rebellion of the Northern earls” against Queen Elizabeth. He was imprisoned and died in 1581. The Dowager Countess Mary, Southampton’s mother, remained “strongly Catholic. One of her son’s tutors was . . . executed in 1591, [and] she was known to hide priests” (ibid. 91). In 1594 she remarried “the elderly Sir Thomas Heneage,” whose “noble marriage” may be suggested in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*” (ibid. 91). He was Essex’s ardent supporter, maybe because of his being a Catholic, and sentenced to death, along with Essex, although he was reprieved and imprisoned in the Tower.

Also, Shakespeare purchased “one of the Gatehouses at Blackfriars” for “£140” (“an early Jacobean pound was worth about £200 today” Nicholl xx), which was “in March in 1613” and “was his only London property” since 1613, because after “the accidental burning of the Globe on June 29, 1613,” there was “no evidence for subsequent shares held by Shakespeare” (Richmond 92-93). What is significantly noteworthy is that the building he acquired “had been a well-known Catholic safe house” (Shapiro 117). “The priest-seeker Topcliffe watched the building in the 1590’s; there was a major raid in 1598, but escape through secret passages, perhaps to the water, meant no arrests. Richard Frith had told the authorities of ‘sundry back-dores and bye-wayes, and many secret vaults and corners. The gunpowder plotter John Gerard asked for the use of a secret room at the gatehouse, and this was enough to implicate the Fortescues [the owner of the property], who subsequently went to St. Omer [where Robert Parsons established the College of Saint Omer] in France (Chambers II, 168)” (Richmond 92). “The friend whom Shakespeare asked to serve as a trustee for the purchase, William Johnson, ran a London tavern that had hosted the plotters” (Shapiro 117). This seems to be suggesting Shakespeare’s intimate connections with Catholicism in England.

Essex's close association with Bolingbroke in Shakespeare's *Richard II*

1595 saw the publication of “*A Conference about the Next Succession to the Crowne of England*, published in Flanders . . . under the pseudonym of ‘R. Doleman’” (Hammer 8), which claims that “deposition was a legitimate political act” (ibid. 27). Hammer notes that “Doleman” as “a pseudonym adopted by the English Jesuit Robert Parsons (or Persons)” is now generally accepted (ibid. 8 22n). This book was dedicated to the Protestant Essex. *A Conference* is “a detailed discussion of the descent of the English crown . . . [and] really argued that both the Tudor and Stuart claims were far inferior to those of the king of Spain and his daughter, who could claim descent from John of Gaunt” (ibid. 8). After Essex’s arrest in February 1601, “Cecil actually backdated the earl’s ambition for the crown to 1595” (ibid. 9), which suggests what a grave impact the dedication of *A Conference* to Essex would have. Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, whose composition is estimated “late in 1595” (Gurr 3), may be a response to *A Conference*’s “*lèse majesté* theme” (Bullough *Henry V* 368). The play was printed in 1597 (Q1), with Q2 and Q3 promptly following in 1598; these frequent re-issues Gurr sees as a sign of its wide circulation: “It was the first play-text to prove so popular as to warrant three printings in the space of two years” (3). *Woodstock*, an anonymous play, considered one of the play’s sources was “chiefly composed in 1592-3,” which “elevates [the Duke of] Gloucester (also known as Thomas of Woodstock) into a plain truth-telling hero, the leading opponent and victim of Richard’s flatterers” (Gurr 6). Gloucester was the younger son of King Edward III and Essex’s distant ancestor. In early 1595, Samuel Daniel’s *The First Fowre Bookes of the Civile Wars* was published, another source-text which “was more open [than *Woodstock*] and wrote a direct address to Essex at the end of Book II of *the Civil Wars*, calling him a leader . . .” (Gurr 6).

The following quotation is taken from the Cambridge scholar Gabriel Harvey’s notes:

Heywoods prouerbs, with His, & Sir Thomas Mores Epigrams may serue. . . . And now translated Petrarch, Aristo, Tasso, & Bartas himself deserue curious comparison with Chaucer, Lidgate, & owre best Inglish, auncient & moderne. Amongst which, the Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia, &

the Faerie Queene ar now freshest in request: & Astrophil, & Amyntas ar none of the idlest pastimes of sum fine humanists. The Earle of Essex much commendes Albions England: and not vnworthily for diuerse notable pageants, before, & in the Chronicle. Sum Inglish, & other Histories nowhere more sensibly described, or more inwardly discovered. The Lord Mountioy makes the like account of Daniels peece of the Chronicle, touching the Vsurpation of Henrie of Bullingbrooke. Which in deede is a fine, sententious & politique peece of Poetrie: as proffitable, as pleasurable. The younger sort takes much delight in Shakespeares Venus, & Adonis: but his Lucrece, & his tragedie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke, haue it in them, to please the wiser sort. (qtd. in *Hamlet The Arden* Second Series 573)

Harvey's statement has been almost always invoked in determining *Hamlet's* composition date: he uses the present tense of "commendes" in his reference to Essex, which indicates he is alive. During Essex's lifetime, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has already been acclaimed by "the wiser sort," so it must have been written before 25 February 1601. Apart from the date issue, Harvey's interests are in English poets and their works, such as John Heywood, who was also famous for his epigrams, Chaucer, John Lydgate, Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, Samuel Daniel and Shakespeare. Essex's commendation seems to have been mentioned merely in order to refer to the poet and historian Samuel Daniel, and his "Chronicle, touching the Vsurpation of Henrie of Bullingbrookes," or "a fine, sententious politique peece of Poetrie: as proffitable, as pleasurable." Harvey seems to be closely associating Essex with Bolingbroke. Daniel's "the Chronicle" here seems to be the same as "*The First Fowre Bookes of the Civile Wars*," which we have seen as a source-text.

Furthermore, in 1599 there came John Hayward's *The First Part of the Life and Raigne of King Henrie the III*, whose problems to the authorities were its description of "the failure of Richard II's government in 1399 in ways that seemed very much like the complaints Elizabeth was facing in 1599," and its dedication, again to Essex, "in terms explicitly comparing him to Bolingbroke" (Hammer 9; Bate 261). This book was "published to great controversy in 1599" (Bate 261) and he was thrown in the Tower, "as Essex's enemies at court sought to build a case against him following the debacle of his Irish campaign" (ibid. 261). Essex attracts various sections of the population pursuing his movements

according to their own concerns, interests and favour, such as Elizabeth, “his enemies at court,” his Protestant followers, Jesuits, Catholics, historians, the public, Shakespeare and so on. Therefore it should be hardly surprising that publications about “*l'èse majesté* theme” in the late 1590s, related to Essex, were so numerous.

Richard II reflects the relationship between the Queen and Essex, concerning whose relationship, for example, the King comments on “his [Bolingbroke’s] courtship to the common people” (1.4.23). This was the exact cause of Essex’s tragedy. Bate raises questions about “the authenticity of this [following] episode” (255, 281-86), yet still this alleged but well known comment by Queen Elizabeth serves to convey their political relationship. The Queen says: “I am Richard 2^d. Know yee not that?” and “hee [Essex] that will forget God will alsoe forgett his benefactor [the anointed queen by God]; this tragedie was played 40^{tie} times in open streets and houses” (qtd. in Hammer 24). According to Hammer (25), “this tragedie” “played 40^{tie} times” does not refer to any particular play at all, but refers to “his courtship to the common people” seen in the streets of London: “Off goes his [Bolingbroke’s] bonnet to an oyster-wench, / A brace of draymen bid God speed him well” (1.4.30-31), which means to “steal away the love rightfully owed to her by her subjects” (Hammer 25). As Richard II puts it, “How he did seem to dive into their hearts / With humble and familiar courtesy” (1.4.24-25). “Essex received [‘blunt cautions’] privately from Lord Henry Howard and Francis Bacon during 1594-96 about the need to be more subtle in his courting of public acclaim lest the queen come to see him as a political threat” (Hammer 23). Concerning the identification of Elizabeth and Richard II, John of Gaunt, for example, condemned Richard II by likening the king to “the pelican” (2.1.126), a “symbol [which] had been conspicuously linked with Elizabeth since the 1570s” (Hammer 27). *Henry V*, for example, may express great expectations toward Essex, who may be described as a great white hope among Londoners. Its Chorus compares Henry V’s triumphant return with that of Julius Caesar (“this Harry” Act 5.1 Chorus l. 35), and that of Essex in the near future: “As by a lower but by loving likelihood, / Were now the general [Essex] of our gracious empress, / As in good time he may, from Ireland coming, / Bringing rebellion broached on his sword / How many would the peaceful city quit, / To welcome him?” (Chorus ll. 29-34). “How London doth pour out her citizens. / The mayor [of London] and all his brethren in best sort” (Chorus ll. 24-25), whose frenzy

of excitement may actually have derived from Shakespeare's own witnessing of the royal general Essex leaving London for Ireland on 27 March 1599. This ostentatiousness in the military procession, however, will prompt a backlash as an act of stealing the majesty's authority.

The performance "of Kyng Harry the iiiith and of the kylling of Kyng
Richard the Second" at the Globe on 7 February 1601

For the Catholics, a performance by the Lord Chamberlain Men at the Globe on the afternoon of 7 February 1601, a day before Essex's Rebellion, proved especially significant. The play is "of Kyng Harry the iiiith and of the kylling of Kyng Richard the Second" (qtd. in Hammer 1). Hammer identifies that particular play as Shakespeare's, based on the fact that those who commissioned and attended it had their own aristocratic ancestors in Shakespeare's *Richard II*. Aside from that identification, its performance may not have had much significance to Essex's plan itself, as Hammer argues. If anything, that very performance demonstrates the high-spiritedness of Essex's Catholic followers, and their high and confident expectations of political success close at hand. Interestingly, all of the "playgoers" were "veterans of Essex's ill-fated Irish expedition" of 1599, and "most of the playgoers (with the obvious exception of Cuffe . . .) were English Catholics" (ibid. 26). According to Augustine Philips's testimony on 18 February, a player in the Lord Chamberlain Men, the commissioners were Sir Charles Percy, Sir Josceline Percy, William Parker, and about three others. Sir Charles and Sir Josceline were younger brothers of the 9th Earl of Northumberland, with whom we will deal later. William Parker, Lord Monteagle, was "Raised a Catholic and not averse to the idea of a Spanish intervention in support of his co-religionists" who, however, "executed a 180° turn" in the Gunpowder plot (Bate 260). It is probable that Shakespeare would have responded to their commission of that performance with fears as to their endangering Essex's cause by their rash enthusiasm going too far. Or Shakespeare may have been excited about "the performance of a Shakespeare's play" (Bate 253) and shared the Catholics's high-spiritedness, without knowing anything about the Essex Rebellion of next day.

On the same day, there occurred "an alarming development" "after dark" (Bate 250). Sir Gelly Meyrick, Essex's steward, "just returned from the play at

the Globe, heard the news just as he and other members of the theatre party were about to sit down to supper at a tavern near Essex House, Meyrick ‘sodaynely departed & sate not at supper’” (qtd. in Hammer 14). Essex “had received an official demand for his immediate attendance before the Privy Council, but also a private message warning him not to go because there was a plot to entice him to the Lord Treasure’s house, where he would be murdered. There was also a rumour that Sir Walter Raleigh and Henry Brooke, Lord Cobham, were on their way to assassinate him in his bed” (Bate 250; Hammer 14). He did not go “even when a second summons arrived, delivered in person by Dr. John Herbert, secretary to the Council” (Bate 250). A new plan had to be “hastily improvised on the night of 7 February” but this changed a lot during the course of Sunday (Hammer 14, 16). It was designed to “capitalize upon the enormous good will toward Essex in London” (ibid. 14). On the next Sunday morning, “Some in the yard cried ‘To the court’ but Essex headed east into the city in order to muster the support of the Lord Mayor[, Aldermen] and the sheriff. Between a hundred and two hundred lords, gentlemen and gallants followed behind as he headed down Fleet Street and under Ludgate. They are not fully armed: the whole adventure was unpremeditated, positively shambolic” (Bate 251). However, Essex’s new plan too was leaked early that morning. The Privy Council took measures to prevent him from meeting the Mayor, so Essex could not meet him or the Aldermen. Then he “next went to the house of [‘the sheriff’] Thomas Smyth . . . who was supposed to be his chief London supporter,” who was shocked and “allegedly tried to escape out the back door” (Hammer 15). His surrender at Essex House in the evening was the end of the Essex Rebellion.

Thus, the play performed on Saturday afternoon had no direct connection with the events of Sunday. However, the “official *Declaration of the Practices & Treasons Attempted by Robert Late Earl of Essex and His Complices* (penned by Francis Bacon)” (Hammer 18) connects Saturday’s play to Sunday’s events. Bacon’s official account “is explicit about Meyrick’s purported motive in procuring the performance: ‘So earnest he was to satisfy his eyes with the sight of that Tragedy, which he thought soon after his Lord should bring from the Stage to the State’” (qtd. in Bate 253), although he protested that “he had no direct knowledge of who had organized the performance” (Hammer 19). He was Essex’s steward and one of his “most conspicuous servants for more than twenty years” (ibid. 19), and executed on 13 March in 1601. That particular

performance thus proved to have grave consequences for Essex's life. Probably more important is that the very presence of *Richard II* itself would have had a significant influence on his "hastily improvised" plan and its enactment on that Sunday; as Bate puts it, "it is possible that Shakespeare did influence the events of 8 February in 1601" (272). As we have seen, Essex demonstrates "his courtship to the common people" in the streets of London and seems to be diving "into their hearts / With humble and familiar courtesy." *Richard II* seems to be vehemently assuring Essex that "in your lord's [Richard's] scale is nothing but himself / And some few vanities [follies, flatterers] that make him light, / But in the balance of great Bullingbrook / Besides himself are all the English peers" (3.4.89-92); "all tongues cried 'God save thee, Bullingbrook!' / You would have thought the very windows spake, / So many greedy looks if young and old / Through casements darted their desiring eyes / Upon his visage, that all the walls / With painted imagery had said at once / 'Jesu preserve thee! Welcome, Bullingbrook!'" (5.2.12-18). Essex seems to have been completely persuaded by Shakespeare's words.

Hopes and anxieties about James VI's religious attitude

James VI was Elizabeth's most likely heir after Mary Stuart was executed in February 1587, whose death was triggered by Walsingham's exposure of her involvement in the Babington Plot at the beginning of August 1586, a plan to assassinate Elizabeth I and put Mary on the English throne (*Polarisation* 59, 157). "While Anglicans could fear that the weak flower of their faith might be plucked by a king who saw an advantage in favoring the Catholic community for his own purposes, the Catholics equally saw James's accession as a chance to put behind them over forty years of growing restrictions on their freedom" (Nicholls 104). After all, James VI was "the son of a Catholic 'martyr'" (qtd. in Nicholls 104), and his wife was also a Catholic. "[O]n both sides of religious divide," there was "a sense of deep uncertainty and unease, feelings sharpened by a genuine vagueness over the king of Scots' own religious persuasions" (ibid. 104). "English Protestantism ran at best skin deep in many adherents, and cries of outrage at the poor provision of the gospel to the mass of the English people set up by the 'puritans'" were justified (ibid. 104). Ultimately, Puritans submitted to James I the Millenary Petition, a list of requests for reform in 1603, as soon as

he succeeded.

Under such circumstances, various kinds of political approaches to James VI were made. During his life time, the protestant “Essex had [had] vigorously championed the claims of James VI of Scotland” (Nicholls 95), with whom he “had had secret correspondence” (Hammer 17). The “Jesuit Robert Parsons in a letter of November 1600” informs “the Spanish ambassador at Rome” that “they [‘Cecil and other English court’] cannot postpone much longer coming to terms with the King of Scotland, if no decision is forthcoming [from Spain and Rome], because they are afraid of the queen dying and of what may be the intentions of the earl of Essex, their enemy, thereafter” (qtd. in Hammer 6). In 1601, finally, Cecil opens “negotiations with James’s emissaries to London . . . who arrived shortly after the February upheavals [in 1601]. Through them he . . . began a secret correspondence with the Scottish king” (Nicholls 96-97), in order to pave the way for his succession. The 9th Earl of Northumberland “followed suit,” after his return to England “at the end of September 1601” (ibid. 97). “In the very first surviving letter in the secret correspondence” (ibid. 102) to James VI, Northumberland writes:

Somme of the purer sort of them [‘the papists’], who hathe swaloued the doctrine of putting doune princes for religion . . . [wish] the enfanta [of Spain, sister of Philip III and wife of Archduke Albert of Flanders] a better scare [‘share’] in the kingdome then your selfe. (qtd. in Nicholls 102)

Nicholls refers to Northumberland’s “readiness to speak on behalf of the English Catholics” and comments on that letter: “it is clear enough recommendation of toleration in some form” (ibid. 102). He also notes that “Cecil too had assured the king that most Catholics were backing his claim” (ibid. 109 42n). Thomas “Percy was a fervent adherent to the Roman Catholic faith” and “Descended from a younger son of the fourth earl of Northumberland” (ibid. 103, 102). Later on, this Percy participated in the Gunpowder Plot on 5 November and “had rented the cellar [of Westminster] for some months” (ibid. 8-9). He became Northumberland’s verbal messenger to James VI “on the subject of toleration” (ibid. 98). “Certainly in 1602” he was “in Northumberland’s entourage” as “very much a ‘coming man’” (qtd. in Nicholls 102). After the suppression of the Gunpowder Plot, the accusation of “securing some measure of toleration for

English Catholics” was made against Northumberland (ibid. 98), who:

answered accusations concerning the Catholics by alleging that Percy, returning from one of his missions to Scotland, had said that ‘the kinges pleasure was that his lordship should giue the Catholiques hopes that they should be well dealt withal or to such effect, and it may be that he hath tould so much as the king said. . . .’ (qtd. in Nicholls 166)

Certainly “the king’s sentiments as related by Percy or as understood by the earl were not those which the king thought he had expressed” (ibid. 98), which would lead to much trouble in the future. Gurr points out to “Shakespeare’s omission of Northumberland’s trickery in snaring Richard before the Flint Castle episode,” an “incident . . . given some emphasis in both Holinshed and [Samuel] Daniel,” and comments that this “makes Richard’s fall more obviously self-inflicted” (“Introduction” *King Richard II, The New Cambridge* 11). Shakespeare seems to have taken the side of his contemporary Henry Percy (the 8th Earl of Northumberland who died in the Tower in 1585), and the above Henry Percy (the 9th Earl of Northumberland who succeeded the 8th Earl).

Thomas Percy had a strong connection to Essex in the 1590s, having enthusiastically participated “in a plot engineered by Essex to entrap the Scottish warder of the Western March in the late 1590s” (Nicholls 103). Although Percy did not participate in Essex’s Rebellion on 8 February, he was a friend of many of those who joined it: Robert Catesby, whose families were connected to “the Ardens,” and who later led the Gunpowder Plot; Lord Monleagle (that same playgoer on 7 February 1601), who exposed and prevented the Plot; Christopher Wright, whose sister Percy had married (Nicholls 103), and so on. So Essex’s Rebellion was closely related to the Gunpowder Plot through English Catholics. The Catholic Thomas Percy’s personal affiliations may show a closely interconnected series of political matters, such as Essex’s political activities, James VI’s precarious status, his accession and the outbreak of the Gunpowder Plot. When English Catholics witnessed James I’s religious attitude, their expectations collapsed and culminated in the failed Gunpowder Plot. This is not a place to explore the Plot, but we are able to learn a lot of Shakespeare’s biographical connections to numerous conspirators from Shapiro’s *Shakespeare in 1606*. In the context of these extremely volatile political and religious

circumstances, *All's Well* was written.

Essex's images in Bertram's "The general of our horse," resistance against the King, and encounter at home "with a shame as ample"

We will explore signs in *All's Well*, which might be related to Essex. Both Bertram and Essex end in shame and humiliation after initially earning a great military reputation. Bertram's career is expressed in one sentence: "The great dignity that his valour hath here acquired for him shall at home be encountered with a shame as ample" (4.3.58-59). He is not like one of *miles gloriosus* in classical comedy (Plautus), but a soldier of genuine stature. It is also stressed that the "French count has done most honourable service" (3.5.3), and that "he has taken their great'st commander, and with his own hand he slew the duke's brother" (3.5.4-5). He was even offered "letters of commendations to the king" by the duke (4.3.66-67). He is conspicuously depicted as a soldier of perfection, but strangely, there are no particular scenes showing his real prowess, and therefore, the contrast between "That great dignity" of "his valour" and "a shame as ample" is too strong for Bertram's story even in comedy. That above statement is by far more appropriate to Essex's life career. According to *RSC*, "One of Essex's chief strategies during his rise to prominence at court in the 1590s was portray himself as a [military] hero from a nobler age that has gone (*Richard II* 829). He starts his "military apprenticeship" in 1585, gets the title of "colonel-general of the horse" when "he was barely twenty" in 1586, a position which was "coveted" in Shakespeare's time (*Polarisation* 47). Then, he was appointed as "master of the horse" in 1587, whose "appointment greatly enforced Essex's status as a favorite" (*Polarisation* 60). This post "entailed close attendance upon the queen, both grand ceremonial occasions and in the more informal circumstances of travel and hunting" (ibid. 60), and whose position was "even more significant because the mastership of the horse had been Leicester's special preserve since the beginning of the reign" (ibid. 61). Even after the failed Irish campaign, "Significantly Essex kept this office to the very end after he had lost everything else" (ibid. 60 106n).

In 1588, Essex "asked [Elizabeth] for his familiar post of general of the horse" and was accordingly appointed "as supreme commander of the cavalry" (ibid. 72). In the play, Parolles may accuse Essex of making a tactical error,

which causes their forces to attack their “own soldiers”: “There was excellent command, to charge in with our horse upon own wings, and to render our own soldiers” (3.6.36-38). Interestingly, Bertram himself is appointed as “The general of our horse” (3.3.1) or “the captain of his horse” (4.3.248). Also, even after his success at Court, “Essex passionately craved the opportunity to win further martial glory. As he wrote from London on the eve of the Armada campaign, ‘yt is not now fit for me to tary heere’” (qtd. in *Polarisation* 71). In the play, when the First Lord pities Bertram for being unable to join the war, “O my sweet lord, that you will stay behind us!” (2.1.24), he explicitly expresses resentment against the King who ordered him to remain at Court and envy for his fellow nobles going to war: “I am commanded here, and kept a coil with, / ‘Too young’ and ‘the next year’ and ‘tis too early’” (ll. 27-28). As *The Oxford* points out (23), Bertram shows anger as if Essex were furious with the Queen for continuing to “dance” at Court and were expressing his open disobedience to her: “I shall stay here the forehorse to a smock [leading horse of a team driven by a woman] / Creaking my shoes on the plain masonry, [as opposed to the field of battle] / Till honour be bought up, and no sword worn / But one to dance with! By heaven, I’ll steal away” (2.1.30n-33). Helena expresses terror of Bertram’s possible “death and danger” (3.4.15) of battle to the Countess in her letter, and prompts her to “write, write that . . . your dear son, may hie” and “Bless him at home in peace” with enthusiasm (3.4.8-10). Helena clearly shares Elizabeth’s awareness of the dangers of battle, and makes Bertram return home for his own safety. When Elizabeth “perceived that Essex’s exalted view of war might be . . . endangering his own life, the full corrective force of her anger was turned against him” (*Polarisation* 117). Finally joining the war, Bertram symbolically apostrophises “Great Mars” (3.3.9) and proudly shows his commitment as “A lover of” the drum of “Great Mars” (“A lover of thy drum” l. 11), experiencing a spiritual uplift which seems similar to that of Essex. *RSC* comments that the great emphasis on “the medieval ‘rites of knighthood’” (1.1.75) at the very beginning of *Richard II* is “very much to Essex’s taste” (829).

All’s Well has conspicuously many references to war, while “Giletta in Narbon,” the play’s overt source-text in Boccaccio, has none. The ideology of honour is caricatured by Parolles’s fake love of the “drum” which becomes “an image of the externals of soldiership, loud and empty” (Leggatt 37). In this reading of the play as an allegory of Essex’s career, even Diana’s speech, “I see

that men make rope's in such a scarre" (4.2.38) may allude to him. The line is commented on as "a celebrated crux, *make rope's* and *scarre* are probably both corrupt" (*The Oxford* 4.2.38n). This "scarre" of Diana's is echoed in 4.5.79-80, whose lines were three-line verse in the 1623 folio and are now translated into two-line prose after Pope amended, which all major texts follow, with "scarre" in the folio modified into "scar." From those lines, we know by "scarre" (the folio) the play means two kinds of "scarre," that is, "A scarre nobly got" (honour in war), and "a noble scarre . . . / So belike is that," the latter of which shows suspicion or fears (since "scarre" is variant of scar and scare / fear) about its dubious nobility. A "scarre," which implies "incisions (*carbonadoes*)" made for syphilis (*The Oxford* 4.5.102n), is shamefully got in the subplot. This "celebrated crux" may allude to Essex's suicidal insurrection ("make rope's" in his fatal uprising) and his subsequent shame and disgrace. Bertram has to "at home be encountered with a shame as ample" while Essex has to endure great humiliation in England after the tragic drama of his abruptly returning from Ireland with his army left there, his ill-prepared Rebellion's failure and his arrest, and his execution officially for treason.

The First Lord begins to lament over Bertram's corrupt designs on a virgin:

FIRST LORD. Now God delay our rebellion! As we are ourselves, what things are we!

SECOND LORD. Merely our own traitors. And as in the common course of all treasons, we still see them reveal themselves, till they attain to their abhorred end. . . . (4.3.17-21)

These comments on Bertram's bad behaviour may appear too excessive to be contained within a comedy. The seriousness of their verdict seems all too fit for the tragic Essex. "[We are] Merely our own traitors" may allude to Essex's disobedience to his benefactor, since he was her leading favorite. Furthermore, in 2.1. Helena is pale and trembling before the King ("A traitor you look like" l. 92), "but such traitors / His majesty seldom fears" (ll. 92-93). Queen Elizabeth had Essex executed, so she "seldom fears" decisive vengeance against "such traitors." Lafew departs with the King and Helena all alone: "I am Cressid's uncle, / That dare leave two together; fare you well" (ll. 93-84). This potentially intimate situation may allude to the rapport of Elizabeth and Essex: "when she

[the queen] is abroad, noboddy [is] neere but my lord of Essex. At night my lord is at cardes of one game or an other with her, [so] that he commeth not his owne lodginge tyll the birdes singe in the morninge” (qtd. in *Polarisation* 56-57). There is a famous anecdote showing their intimate relationship, recounting how Essex, just having returned from his Irish campaign, “burst into Queen Elizabeth’s private chamber early in the morning” (Bate 261).

“Elizabeth had at various times shown special grace to a large number of courtiers” (*Polarisation* 57). There were two distinct generations of royal favorites, that is, the old generation including “Leicester and Hatton” and the younger who are “Walter Raleigh and Essex” (ibid. 58). The loyal Lafew and the Countess belong to the former while the rebellious Bertram to the latter. These “ambitious young men at Elizabeth’s Court literally became suitors of her favour. As the queen grew older, this phenomenon became an increasingly bizarre, almost schizophrenic, game for the courtiers” (ibid. 57), which Helena may satirise in the lines: “There shall your master have a thousand loves, / A mother, a mistress, and a friend, / A phoenix. A captain, and an enemy . . . a sovereign. . . . The court’s a learning place, and he is one—” (1.1.141-51). Hammer writes:

Publicly, ambitious young courtiers conformed themselves to this elaborate charade in the hope of winning the only gratification available from the queen: material reward. Privately, these same men resented the hold which Elizabeth had over them and felt demeaned by the poses which she made them strike. Behind the obsequious façade, many of the younger generation of courtiers viewed their time at Court as a trial to be endured and muttered scornful comments about their royal mistress. (*Polarisation* 57)

All’s Well forcefully dramatises this hate for the royal hold over those from whom Helena can choose her partner. Instead of obeying the King’s order, the young lords give a very short and perfunctory answer to Helena. Lafew gets furious with them: “These boys are boys of ice, they’ll none have her. Sure they are bastards to the English, the French ne’er got’em” (2.3.86-87). He may allude to “ambitious young courtiers” who manage to hide their rebellious mind before the English Queen. Lafew is always finding faults with members of the “younger generation” such as Bertram and Parolles: “How understand we that?” (1.1.42) he remarks with contempt; he comments Bertram as “an ass,” and “may

be covertly addressing” (*The New Cambridge* 92n) to Bertram, “I have known thee already” (2.3.92-93); Parolles “was first smoked by the old Lafew” (3.6.82). In referring to Bertram’s dubious “scarre,” Lafew says, “I long to talk with the young noble soldier” (4.5.82-85), which sounds as if Shakespeare wanted to hear from Essex himself, or, more ominously as if the secretary of state Cecil wanted to interrogate Essex, prior to torture. Bertram, because Helena has chosen him, cannot hide his dislike of the coercion of marriage under wardship, and immediately reveals his resentment against such control, strongly refusing the King with “But”: “But follows it, my lord, to bring me down / Must answer for your raising?” (2.3.104-05). When Bertram learns of the King’s recovery, he responds to it merely with “And so ’tis” (2.3.8). The monarch’s life should be the most important matter for every subject, and therefore his curt reaction “And so ’tis” may show his hostility to the King, or his disappointment at not seeing the new succession to the English crown. As for Shakespeare himself, “Amidst an effusion of tributes for Elizabeth after her death, there is none from Shakespeare, as Henry Chettle noted at the time” (Richmond 84). Just after Robert Greene died, this Chettle published Greene’s *Groats-worth of Wit* in 1592, which disdained Shakespeare. Chettle was accused of writing it under Greene’s name, and within the same year of 1592, Chettle vindicated Shakespeare’s uprightness in the preface to his *Kind-Heart’s Dream*, whose vindication is well-known. Similarly, Parolles too criticizes “Virginity” who “like an old courtier, wears her cap out of fashion; richly suited, but unsuitable: just like brooch and toothpick, which wear not now” (1.1.133-35).

Bertram seems to be a noble youth of similar mould to Essex: headstrong, petulant, naïve, and volatile. This may be most confirmed in that violent resistance of his to the King with “But follows it, my lord” and his quick decision: “O my Parolles, they have married me! / I’ll to the Tuscan wars, and never bed her” (2.3.249-50). It seems that Essex had no such “purpose of getting the Queen into his power and attacking the State” (Hammer 16). “According to one account, Essex admitted, ‘I and 12 others of the greatest of the nobility of England, with many other of our noble friends and kinsmen, lords, knights and gentlemen, were fully resolved to have repaired to her Majesty, humbly prostrating ourselves upon our knees at her Majesty’s feet, and to have made known unto her Highness the injuries and indignities our enemies had daily offered us’” (qtd. in Hammer 12), which may be too naïve. We may infer Essex’s

impetuousness from his 28 September 1599's sudden return from Ireland with his army left there, and 8 February 1601's Rebellion, which does not at all seem to have been his original plan. Even Shakespeare's Duke Fredrick's strange abandonment of "a mighty power" (*As You Like It* 5.4.129) may be an allusion to Essex's abrupt return. Even "The duke [Fredrick] hath put on a religious life" (ibid. l. 155) may refer to Essex's state of being deprived of almost every office after his return from Ireland and his subsequent status of recluse. *As You Like It* was written "in 1599 or early 1600" (RSC). Even Hamlet's praise of Fortinbras's turbulent aggression might even be seen as an allusion to Essex: "Witness this army of such mass and charge, / Led by a delicate and tender prince / Whose spirit with divine ambition puffed / Makes mouths at the invisible event / Exposing what is mortal and unsure / To all that fortune, death and danger dare / Even for an eggshell" (*Hamlet The Arden Shakespeare Third Series* 4.4.46-52).

We have seen Lavatch's complaint about "woman's command" (1.3.73) as one of many "probable allusions to Elizabeth" (*The Oxford* 23). In fact, these have already begun with his quoting a "song" about Trojan Helen: "Was this fair face the cause . . . / Why the Grecians sacked Troy" (qtd. in 1.3.55-56), and his "corrupt[ing] the song" (l. 65). For him, Helen is a symbol of a bad woman. He says the birth rate of "One good woman in ten . . . is [merely] a purifying a'th'song" (l. 66-67), whose high rate would delight "the parson": "we'd find no fault with the tithe-woman if I were the parson" (l. 67-68). If anything, the degree of its likeliness is astronomically lower: "a good woman [is] born but ore [i.e. in conjunction with] every blazing star or at an earthquake" or "the lottery" (ll. 69n-70). In this reading of the play as being in favour of Catholicism, even Lavatch's "the parson" may refer to the Jesuit Robert Parsons, who had had politically strong connections with the Catholic Spain. Or another 'parson,' that is, the Cardinal William Allen, who was closely related to Parsons and Philip II. Since he invokes Trojan Helena when he abuses the Queen, the indecent Lavatch may gleefully recall Allen's egregious slander in his *An Admonition to the Nobility & People of England* of 1587: Queen Elizabeth is "an incestuous bastard, begotten and born in sin of an infamous courtesan . . ." (qtd. in Milward 191). Because of this acute shortage of good women, English Catholics have to endure the bad female as their own ruler, who is the head of the Church of England. He continues: "That man should be at woman's command, and yet no hurt done! Though honesty be no puritan, yet it will do no hurt; it will wear the

surplice of humility over the black gown of a big heart” (1.3.73-75). In light of Lavatch’s rigid dichotomy between “young Charbon the puritan and old Poysam the papist” (1.3.40-41), any new reformers such as “the Lollard martyr Sir John Oldcastle [Lord Cobham, executed in 1417]” (Bate 254) and the adherents of Anglicanism could be equally seen as strongly puritan. In *Henry IV*, Sir John Oldcastle, later renamed as Falstaff, is playfully mocked, with no allowances made for him (depicted as “full of gross insult” Bate 254). Importantly, Henry Brooke, the 8th Lord Cobham, was “a leading figure in the anti-Essex faction” (ibid. 254). Lavatch’s series of comments may be seen as expressing the soul of the play.

The Catholic plotters of the Gunpowder “were pragmatic enough to reach out to non-Catholics. Fawkes confessed that they had intended to make ‘use of all the discontented people in England’; the appeal, [Everard] Digby writes, would have been broad, including a call for abolishing ‘wardships and monopolies’” (qtd. in Shapiro 120). Essex himself was “one of the queen’s wards” (*Polarisation* 54) and had experienced her refusal to “keep her promise of granting Essex the Master of the Wards” (Hammer 29), the assignment of whose position rested exclusively on royal prerogative, and was immensely lucrative. The Earl of Southampton, for example, became “*Her Majesty’s Ward*” (Akrigg 23), and after sometime he was “delivered into the care of William Cecil” (ibid. 23), who wanted his granddaughter Lady Elizabeth Veer to marry Southampton, who refused, so he had to pay “5000li of present Payment” as “the fine” (ibid. 39). “By making him pay this great sum in one payment, Burghley probably forced Southampton to go to the moneylenders” (ibid. 39). His “unwillingness to follow Burghley’s proposed marriage” may be related to his religion (Richmond 91). Interestingly, *All’s Well* begins with the topic of wardship (1.1.3-4) by Bertram referring to his own subordinate status: “I must attend his majesty’s command, to whom I am now in ward, evermore in subjection.” The office consisted of his / her person including the rights of arrangement of their marriage and estates, and epitomized the authority of an absolute monarch, whose immense power is conspicuously represented in the play’s last scene of 5.3.1-36, for example, “The nature of his great offence is dead, / And deeper than oblivion we do bury / Th’incensing relics of it” (ll. 23-25), and “I am not a day of season, / For thou mayst see a sunshine and a hail / In me at once. But to the brightest beams / Distracted clouds give way, so stand thou forth, / The time is fair again” (ll.

32-36). Even in granting favours, at the next moment the King may take “his great offence” and be relentless in executing traitors. He explicitly expresses his limitless capacity to deploy arbitrary command. The Catholic plotters’s “call for abolishing ‘wardships and monopolies’” would have been very appropriate when they tried to gather public support as much as possible and bring down the incumbent government.

Shakespeare’s plays have many other scenes alluding to Essex at his peak, for example, his military procession through London streets as the royal commander cheered by all Londoners in *Henry V* and as the future king (Bolingbroke) in *Richard II*, as we have seen, so it is natural to think there may also be something about his end. The characters at the opening of *All’s Well* are in mourning, which may be interpreted as allegorizing the loss of Essex and nostalgia for him. The somber mood may be dedicated to the death of Essex and serve as a kind of elegy for him, or a lament by “old Poysam the papist.” “Among the plays, *All’s Well*’s most interesting affinities are with *Hamlet*” (Laggatt 7). One of them is both of Hamlet and Helena are “affect[ing] a sorrow” (1.1.42). Hamlet’s black clothes are merely an outward appearance, which he differentiates from “that within which passes show” (1.2.85), and his “outer and inner mourning are directed to the same object, his father” (Laggatt 7). On the other hand, Helena’s “I do affect a sorrow indeed, but I have it too” makes us suspicious about her personality itself and puzzled greatly until she mentions “Bertram” in her first soliloquy (1.1.71). Her “sorrow” is not directed to the object which the characters would naturally assume. Helena feigns death as a “pilgrim,” and is Diana’s “like” (“like this maid” 5.3.299) in the bed trick. She is good at pretending. Helena’s “I do affect a sorrow indeed” is at the beginning of the play, at which point the object of “a sorrow” is suspended while the object of inner mourning is hidden. The play may have a room for “affect[ing] a sorrow” or “death” for another person, Essex. One thing is clear: the passion of English Catholics cannot be appeased simply by a regime change, as any new monarch would remain the head of the Protestant Church of England.

* Quotations from *All’s Well That Ends Well* are from *The New Cambridge Shakespeare*.

Abbreviations

Hammer Hammer, "Shakespeare's *Richard II*, the Play of 7 February 1601, and the Essex Rising."

Polarisation Hammer, The Polarisation of Elizabethan Politics.

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